

FACILITATING PARTICIPATION OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN  
AT GCSE: YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES, IN ONE LOCAL  
AUTHORITY

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## Abstract

Raising the attainment of 'Looked After Children' is a high priority in national and local policy. Education is especially important for 'Looked After Children' given their likely adverse early life experiences, but despite numerous government reforms, educational outcomes for 'Looked After Children' continue to be poor when compared to outcomes for all children. The study reported here explores *participation* in GCSE (or equivalent) programmes of study, a critical initial stage in enabling participation in further education or training. Fifteen looked after young people, from one local authority, who had taken GCSEs were interviewed about their perceptions of the experiences that had led to their participation in exams and programmes of study. Interview transcripts were subjected to Thematic Analysis. Four key themes related to the concept of resilience were indicated, highlighting the significance of: relationships; academic support; personal characteristics and the management of change in care placements. Themes are described in relation to relevant literature. There is an additional focus on the practical application of results for those working with 'Looked After Children', considered as a set of recommendations for practice at a strategic level, and also for groups of professionals including Educational Psychologists, Social Services staff, foster carers and residential key workers and school staff.

## **Declaration of word count**

The word count (exclusive of appendices, list of references and bibliography) is 34 990 words.

## **Declaration of own work**

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

*A. J. Costa*

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# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Declaration of word count</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Declaration of own work</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Contents</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>List of tables</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>List of appendices</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter One – Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Context	9
1.1.1 Local Context	9
1.1.2 Professional Context of the Research	10
1.2 Research Question	12
1.3 Terminology and Definitions	13
1.4 Ensuing Chapters	14
<b>Chapter Two – Literature Review</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1 Looked After Children and General Outcomes	15
2.2 Looked After Children and Education	16
2.2.1 Educational Outcomes	16
2.2.2 Importance of Education	18
2.2.3 Risk and Protective Factors in Relation to Education and Being in Care	18
2.3 GCSEs and Equivalent Programmes of Study	22
2.3.1 The Perceived Importance of GCSEs	22
2.3.2 Choices at GCSE	23
2.3.3 Support at GCSE	24
2.4 Looked After Young People Compared to Other Populations at GCSE	25
2.4.1 Attainment of Looked After Young People Compared to All Young People	25
2.4.2 Attainment of Looked After Young People Compared to Other Vulnerable Populations	27
2.4.3 Participation in GCSE Programmes of Study	30
2.5 Government Guidance, Policy and Practice	31
2.6 Listening to the Voice of Young People	34
2.7 Aims and Objectives of the Current Research	36
<b>Chapter Three - Methodology</b>	<b>38</b>
3.1 Epistemological and Ontological Considerations	38
3.2 Methodology	40
3.3 Data Collection	42
3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviewing	42
3.3.2 Participants	43

3.3.3	Other Preparatory Work .....	47
3.3.4	Procedure .....	48
3.4	Data Analysis .....	49
<b>Chapter Four – Results .....</b>	<b>52</b>	
4.1	Overview of Themes and Sub-themes .....	52
4.2	Theme One – Relationships and Experiences Impacting on Emotional Well-being.....	54
4.2.1	Significant/Attachment relationships .....	55
4.2.2	Availability of Supportive Social Networks .....	58
4.2.3	Engagement in Wider Social Networks.....	61
4.2.4	Harmony/Discord .....	62
4.3	Theme Two –Academic/Learning Support and Experiences.....	63
4.3.1	Mainstream School Systems and Procedures .....	64
4.3.2	Targeted Support in Schools.....	66
4.3.3	External Learning Support .....	69
4.3.4	Academic Choices and Preferences.....	71
4.3.5	Past Academic Experiences .....	74
4.4	Theme Three – Personal Characteristics .....	76
4.4.1	Educational Values and Aspirations.....	77
4.4.2	Coping Strategies and Behaviour.....	78
4.4.3	Self-Efficacy .....	81
4.5	Theme Four – Management of Change .....	83
4.5.1	Continuity at Home.....	85
4.5.2	Continuity Within the School Environment.....	87
4.7	Summary.....	88
<b>Chapter Five – Discussion.....</b>	<b>89</b>	
5.1	Overview .....	89
5.2	Young People's Views of Protective and Risk Factors .....	90
5.2.1	School Systems Policy and Practice .....	90
5.2.2	Public Care Systems.....	97
5.2.3	Personal Relationships .....	101
5.2.4	Personal/Intrinsic Factors.....	106
5.3	Summing Up .....	110
<b>Chapter Six - Recommendations .....</b>	<b>112</b>	
6.1	Recommendations for Policy and Practice Within the Borough .....	112
6.1.1	Overarching Recommendations.....	112
6.1.2	Recommendations for Educational Psychology Services .....	114
6.1.3	Recommendations for Foster Carers/Residential Key Workers .....	116
6.1.4	Recommendations for Schools .....	116
6.1.5	Recommendations for Social Services.....	118
6.2	Summary and Future Directions.....	120
<b>References .....</b>	<b>121</b>	
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>129</b>	

## List of tables

1. Looked after children per 10, 000 population (under 18) at 31 March between 2004 and 2008.
2. Percentage of children looked after continuously for at least 2.5 years, who had lived in the same placement for at least 2 years, or were placed for adoption, between 2004 and 2008.
3. Performance of all children and looked after children at Key Stages One to Three, using averages across three Key Stage tests.
4. Attainment at GCSE for all children and those looked after nationally and within the target borough, 2007 and 2008.
5. Looked after young people compared to other vulnerable populations at GCSE, within the target borough.
6. GCSE results of participants in the current study.

## **List of appendices**

1. GCSEs and equivalent qualifications
2. Letter sample
3. Information Sheet sample
4. Interview Transcript sample
5. Table of codes related to themes and sub-themes



# Chapter One – Introduction

## 1.1 Context

*“There has been a growing disquiet about the vulnerability of young people in the care system that has led to an awakening of professional and political consciousness.”*

(Evans, 2003, p.58).

In recent years there has been much government guidance and legislation aimed at raising standards for young people in public care. Alongside a focus on the quality of care, educational standards have been viewed as a priority, and government has sought to reduce the gap in achievement and subsequent outcomes between those in care and other children. Reflecting that policy emphasis, the study reported here focuses on educational outcomes of looked after young people, specifically in relation to participation in GCSE and equivalent programmes of study.

### 1.1.1 Local Context

The research was conducted within an inner London local authority, where Social Care and Education provision formed part of Children’s Services. The local authority had been selected to pilot the role of ‘Virtual Headteacher for Looked After Children’ in an effort to promote the attainment of looked after children relative to all children in the borough. Raising the attainment of looked after children was a key outcome measure within the service plans of Children’s Services and the Educational Psychology Service (EPS). Historically, all children and those looked after in the borough have attained less well than all children and those looked after nationally, as will be explored more fully in Chapter Two.

For the year 2006/2007 there were 525 looked after children in the borough, of whom approximately 360 were of statutory school age. In 2008, there were 510 looked after children suggesting the figures are broadly similar from year to

year. Rates of looked after children in the borough, its statistical neighbours and nationally are shown in Table One.

**Table 1            Looked after children per 10, 000 population (under 18) at 31 March between 2004 and 2008\***

Rate per 10 000	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Local Authority	107	97	102	101	98
Statistical Neighbours	93	92	90	89	85
Nationally	55	55	55	55	54

\*Source: Local Authority (2008).

The local authority has had a comparatively high rate of looked after children relative to figures for its statistical neighbours and nationally.

The borough has been targeting placement stability in an effort to promote better outcomes for looked after children. To that end the long-term stability of placements for looked after children in the borough showed an improvement in 2008, relative to previous years and figures for its statistical neighbours, London and England (See Table Two).

**Table 2            Percentage of children looked after continuously for at least 2.5 years, who had lived in the same placement for at least 2 years, or were placed for adoption, between 2004 and 2008\*.**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Local Authority	60.1	53.2	52.7	63.3	74.1
Statistical Neighbours	60.5	59	62.5	63.6	66.3
London	62	61.1	61.7	64.6	66.8
England	63.7	62.9	63.5	64.5	65.7

\*Source: Local Authority (2008).

### **1.1.2 Professional Context of the Research**

The current study was undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology, and was determined in part by the requirements of the professional qualification as well as by local authority priorities, as indicated above. In particular, early scoping to inform plans for the study indicated that there were a high number of looked after young people in

the local authority who had not taken GCSE (or equivalent) programmes of study in the year 2007, relative to national statistics. These figures are explored fully in Chapter Two.

### *The Role of Educational Psychology*

A Working Group was established by the Government in 1998 to consider the future role and training of Educational Psychologists (EPs). According to this group the aim of Educational Psychologists was:

*“To promote child development and learning through the application of psychology by working with individuals and groups of children, teachers and other adults in schools, families, other LEA officers, health and social services and other agencies”*

(DfEE, 2000, p.5).

It was also recommended that Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) should work to meet local and national priorities for raising standards in schools and promoting inclusion. The research reported here aimed to work with looked after young people to investigate ways of raising participation at GCSE. In this way it will contribute to the participation, development and learning of looked after young people in the future.

Since the *Every Child Matters* agenda (2004) and subsequent *Children Act* (2004) came into effect, EPSs have undergone a period of transformation. The restructuring of local authorities into Children's Services combining education and social services means that EPs are increasingly working in community contexts and not just in schools. There has also been a focus on multi-agency working (Farrell et al., 2006). In the borough where the present study was conducted, the Educational Psychology Service developed specialist EP posts, with an expectation that these postholders would work with other services at a strategic level. Two Senior Specialist Educational Psychologists have shared responsibility for representing the EPS at multi-agency meetings regarding policy for looked after children within the borough, and for disseminating

relevant information to all other Educational Psychologists within the service. They have also worked closely with the 'Virtual Headteacher for Looked After Children'.

### *The Professional Doctorate*

The Professional Doctorate programme at the Institute of Education is underpinned by a number of psychological models. Particularly relevant to the research reported here was a belief in Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1986), which suggests that in order to make sense of an individual's actions, one must understand the meanings that events or circumstances have for the individual concerned. Further, relationships with others and past experiences would be important for an individual in making sense of and acting towards future stimuli. This model influenced the research insofar as it indicated that it was important to understand the perceptions of looked after young people themselves when investigating their participation in GCSEs (or equivalent).

Another model of the programme that was significant to the research was Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecosystemic Model. This model considers the impact of systems in layers labelled 'microsystem', 'mesosystem', 'exosystem' and 'macrosystem', with each additional layer representing systems further removed from the individual than the preceding one, highlighting the importance of the links between "*contextual, personal and interpersonal variables*" (Cameron, 2006, p.293). The eco-systemic approach is advocated in educational psychology, as it continues and develops traditional humanistic approaches. This theoretical model influenced the research in that it prioritised a focus on the experiences of the individual within the current national and local context and indicated the need to consider the impact of systems operating at different levels in young peoples' lives.

## **1.2 Research Question**

The research reported here explored the perceptions of young people themselves, in relation to the experiences that led to them taking GCSEs. These perceptions were the specific focus as it follows that a necessary precursor to

raising attainment of looked after children at GCSE, is to understand the behaviour of actually participating in any GCSE programmes of study in the first instance. At the inception of the study, the research aimed to explore the views of those who had taken GCSEs and those who had not. Later difficulties with accessing a relevant sample of looked after young people who had not taken GCSEs precluded this group from further study within the time constraints of the Professional Doctorate. The research question evolved in keeping with this practical consideration, and the research eventually investigated the views of those looked after young people who had taken GCSEs at the same time as their age-related peers, in 2007 and 2008. Thus, the research focused on those individuals who had taken GCSEs at the age of 15 or 16 years, in line with expected age at the end of Key Stage Four, which is the end of compulsory education.

The research question was:

**What are looked after young people's perceptions of their experiences of education leading to them taking GCSEs?**

The specific aims and objectives of the research will be outlined at the conclusion of the next chapter, following a review of the relevant literature.

### **1.3 Terminology and Definitions**

- For the purposes of the research reported here, being "Looked after" follows the 1989 *Children Act* definition:

*"all young people living away from home and cared for by Social Services".*

- In line with official government statistics, the research included only those looked after young people who had been looked after continuously for at least 12 months at 30<sup>th</sup> September of the year reported. These young people will, henceforth, be termed 'looked after' or 'in care'.

- The programmes of study equivalent to GCSEs are shown in Appendix One. Any future references to GCSE(s) are inclusive of these.

## **1.4 Ensuing Chapters**

The following chapters will go on to describe the study in detail. Chapter Two outlines literature related to education and looked after children, with a specific focus on GCSEs. Chapter Three elucidates the methodological considerations of the research and the methods used to obtain and analyse the data. Chapter Four illustrates the outcome of the analysis using supporting quotes from interviews, analysed thematically. Chapter Five considers the outcomes of the analysis in relation to literature, summarising the contribution of the current research to academic knowledge and to the target local authority. Finally, Chapter Six illustrates conclusions and implications for the professional role of the EP and for the wider context.

## Chapter Two – Literature Review

This chapter considers literature relevant to the specific research question. It summarises and synthesises information taken from a number of wide topic areas, and outlines the links to the aims, objectives and questions of the current research study. The summary does not attempt to reflect all of the literature pertaining to looked after children, and is selective in its coverage, as is appropriate to a thesis of this type and length.

### 2.1 Looked After Children and General Outcomes

According to government statistics (DCSF, 2008b) there were 44,200 children who had been looked after continuously for at least twelve months by English local authorities, at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2006 and 2007, rising to 43,700 in 2008 (DCSF, 2009b). Although these figures represented only around half a per cent of all children nationally (DCSF, 2008a), they account for a large number of young people.

Children in care have been shown to be a vulnerable group, having already experienced disadvantage when they enter the care system. A large proportion would have been exposed to neglect, or suffered physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Many may have experienced parental mental illness, domestic violence and breakdown, and parental imprisonment. (Nicholas, Roberts & Wurr, 2003). This history of disadvantage has implications for understanding outcomes for looked after children, as discussed in brief below. Government policy, such as *Quality Protects* (DoH, 1998) and *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) has aimed to address this disadvantage and is considered in more detail in Section 2.5.

The Department of Health (2002) stated that looked after young people have increased health needs when compared to other children from comparable socio-economic backgrounds that were not taken into care. Young people who had been in care were two and a half times more likely to become teenage parents than other young people (SEU, 2003). As well as physical health concerns, research has also indicated a high incidence of child mental health

problems and psychiatric disorders in children in care, particularly those in residential homes (Nicholas et al., 2003). McAuley and Young (2006) reported that children who are looked after are almost five times more likely to have a mental disorder than children in the general population.

Young people with a background in care have been over-represented among the homeless and it has been argued that they have frequently had to leave residential or foster care before they were prepared (Evans, 2003). Research (SEU, 2003) found that between a quarter and a third of rough sleepers were once in care. The latter study also found that over a quarter of prisoners were in care as children. The link between crime and being looked after was said to be mediated by disaffection at school with looked after young people being more likely to be excluded or to exclude themselves from school, leaving them at increased risk of criminal behaviour (Audit Commission, 1996).

The brief overview above indicates that being looked after as a child has had far-reaching implications for the future life success of individuals felt at a personal level, and high social and economic costs at a wider level. The focus on widespread entrenched social disadvantage can be challenging for professionals and policy makers alike when considering how to make a positive impact on the lives of looked after children. Education and attainment, however, have been postulated as a way in which to influence the assumed negative trajectory of social disadvantage for looked after young people (e.g. Rutter, 1976).

## **2.2 Looked After Children and Education**

### **2.2.1 Educational Outcomes**

When Sonia Jackson (1987) began to write her Bristol Papers on '*The Education of Children in Care*', she found a wealth of literature focussed on foster care, and on educational disadvantage. She was struck, however, by the dearth of literature combining the two, and documenting the education of children in foster and residential care. Following an initial frustration at this glaring omission, Jackson (1987) realised that an absence of literature was in itself important evidence. She concluded that,



*“researchers and practitioners do not see education as a particularly interesting or important aspect of care for separated children.”*

(Jackson, 1987, p.5).

Jackson (1987) found that children who came into care were at high risk of educational failure and that the factors affecting their education were; pre-care experience, disrupted schooling, low expectations, low self-esteem and a lack of continuity. Her research contributed to evidence submitted to the House of Commons Social Services Committee’s inquiry into Children in Care (Department of Health and Social Security, 1984) and may have had a seminal role in future legislation and government agendas for those children concerned. It initiated an increased focus on educational attainment, and the effect this could have on life chances.

A subsequent study by Heath, Colton and Aldgate (1989) compared children in foster care to children from families receiving support from social services but who had not been taken into care. They found that children in foster care consistently failed to make the same educational progress as the comparison group, even when they were placed in ‘good quality’ foster placements. Simon and Owen (2006) commented that the educational underachievement of looked after children relative to all children occurred at Key Stage One, with the gap widening in subsequent Key Stages. The same pattern of accelerating underachievement persisted in 2007, as shown in the table below.

**Table 3            Performance of all children and looked after children at Key Stages One to Three, using averages across three Key Stage tests\***

Key Stage	Looked after children attaining expected levels	All children attaining expected levels
One	57%	85%
Two	48%	82%
Three	30%	74%

\*Source: DCSF (2008b).

As well as having poorer attainment, research has shown that children in care are 10 times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers (SEU, 2003), perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage in education for looked after young people.

In light of the history of poor educational outcomes, recent research has focussed on the impact of positive educational experiences, as outlined in the next section.

### **2.2.2 Importance of Education**

Jackson and Simon (2006) argued that learning and education can have a positive effect on physical and mental health, through its impact on later economic conditions and social status, and through specific health behaviours affecting uptake of medical services. Furthermore, they reported that measures of education such as years in formal education and level of qualifications, showed a positive correlation with mental health measures such as happiness, lower rates of depression and reduced risk of suicide. They wrote that:

*“Outcomes of learning include improvements in self-esteem, self efficacy, interpersonal trust, anti-discriminatory attitudes, access to a wider network of social support, and social and political engagement and activity.”*

Jackson and Simon (2006, p.45).

These authors suggested that education impacted not only on health-related behaviours, but also on resilience, a concept that will be discussed further in the next section.

### **2.2.3 Risk and Protective Factors in Relation to Education and Being in Care.**

In understanding risk and protective factors that relate to disadvantage, resilience offers a useful conceptual framework. The concept of resilience has been used to refer to the qualities that help a vulnerable child or young person to deal with adversity and that may help a person to cope in the face of immense pain and disadvantage (Stein, 2004). Resilience does not only depend on internal qualities, however, and Gilligan (2000) has made a distinction

between the part of resilience that is thought to depend on the disposition of an individual and that with a social origin that can be influenced by social experiences and the way in which these experiences are processed by individuals -demonstrating that resilience can be changed.

Factors that have been shown to promote resilience for looked after children are: building a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy; having a close tie with at least one significant adult (carer, social worker, teacher), and being happy and involved at school (SCIE, 2004). Stein (2004) also commented that the resilience of young people could be promoted through: providing them with stability (of care setting, school, staff); helping them to develop a positive self identity; enabling a positive experience of education; having opportunities for turning points, planning and problem solving and more gradual and supported transitions from care. Gilligan (2000; 2004; 2007; 2008) highlighted the importance of positive relationships with adults and involvement in recreational and work experience activities, as factors to enhance resilience. Risk factors, according to Schofield and Beek (2005) could be understood as the absence, or opposite, of factors that have been shown to offer protection. The CAMHS Review (2008) highlighted some risk factors as being: parental conflict; family breakdown; hostile or rejecting relationships; academic failure and low self-esteem. Some protective and risk factors for resilience in relation to education and care circumstances have been examined in past research and are highlighted next.

### *Relationships*

Early relationships have been highlighted as being of central importance in the organisation of neuronal growth of prefrontal executive functions, such as memory, narrative, emotion, representation and states of mind (Balbernie, 2001). A secure, reflective internal working model of oneself and the reliability of others have been shown as crucial in the development of self-esteem and motivation in scholastic achievement and learning environments (Greig et al., 2008). Geddes and Hanko (2006) highlighted the significance of early relationships for cognitive and emotional development. They reported that adverse experiences of early relationships are likely to have negative implications for communication and

behaviour, exploration and learning, the development of self esteem, responses to stressful circumstances and relationships with adults. Many young people in care are likely to have had a lack of positive attachment experiences and this would have a probable impact on their school motivation and attainment. The authors above also suggested that, according to attachment theory, later positive attachment experiences have relieved some of the negative effects of early poor relationships. Jackson and Martin (1998) found that in their sample of looked after children with educational success (five or more GCSEs at grade C or above) young people mentioned the importance of having a parent/carer who valued education and meeting a significant adult who promoted and encouraged learning. In a later study young people mentioned the importance of a 'guardian angel' figure, as a person with whom they had a special relationship (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

As well as attachment relationships, less significant relationships with adults and peers have also been shown to impact on motivation to do well educationally. The salience of relationships with others was captured in the findings of A National Voice (2007). These researchers asked young people to suggest ways in which their education could have been improved. Responses indicated that they would have valued more support from adults such as teachers, carers, social workers and personal advisors, and would have welcomed encouragement to help them believe in themselves.

Jackson and Sachdev (2001) interviewed looked after young people in focus groups, and found that young people often felt that there was no one acting as an advocate or 'corporate parent' with an overview of their situation and a special interest in them. They also felt that social workers, carers and school staff had low educational expectations, and did not encourage them to reach their potential. Many looked after children came from homes where there was little praise and encouragement to learn, and this was likely to have impacted on their self-esteem. Conversely, young people in Jackson and Martin's (1998) study commented on the value of: having friends outside care who did well at school; having hobbies or interests outside of school; being encouraged by others and having a good open relationship with a social worker. Such relationships and experiences widened the social network that young people

were able to access when they needed to. Harker, Dobel-Ober, Berridge and Sinclair (2004) noted the importance of social workers, and the positive role they could play in encouraging young people educationally.

### *Stability and transition*

Young people in Barnardo's (2006) study suggested that negative experiences affecting their attainment in school included the number of placement moves, with half of the young people in their sample having moved more than four times and having attended on average five schools. Jackson and Martin (1998) found that stability, continuity and regular attendance at school offered some protection to their successful looked after sample. Dearden (2004) also commented that times of transition in school and care placements can be crucial as turning points for young people's behaviour.

### *Educational Experiences*

Particular educational experiences have been shown to impact on motivation. For example, Jackson and Martin (1998) found that learning to read early was a protective factor, and that young people felt they would have benefited further from having access to practical resources and relevant school support. Jackson and Sachdev (2001) found that the care environment presented a barrier to learning, in that it did not afford a quiet space for looked after children to study and also had a lack of other educational resources.

### *The Role of the Corporate Parent*

Harker et al. (2004) carried out a large-scale project on behalf of the National Children's Bureau. Their project paid particular attention to the role of corporate parenting, and investigated whether any elements of change appeared to make a difference to young people's education. They found that supportive care placements were central to educational progress. The authors suggested that local authorities had a role in ensuring carers understood the importance of education and received training about how to respond to educational issues. Finally they concluded that a whole authority approach with shared information

and a 'champion' to co-ordinate work in the area were vital for the success of services for looked after children.

The research study reported here aimed to ascertain the specific risk and protective factors that looked after young people felt had influenced their participation at GCSE in the target borough. The study goes beyond a broad focus on education as a whole, to examining practices and experiences specific to GCSEs.

## **2.3 GCSEs and Equivalent Programmes of Study**

The research outlined above highlighted the importance of participation in education for looked after children, and – as noted earlier – education for children in public care has been a key priority for national and local government (e.g. *Care Matters*, DfES, 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d). Within this context, government prioritised participation and attainment at GCSE as a key outcome indicator for looked after children. The following sections illustrate the importance of participation at GCSE, indicative of the reasons that it has been prioritised.

### **2.3.1 The Perceived Importance of GCSEs**

The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) was first undertaken by 16-year-olds in the UK in the summer term of 1988. The original philosophy of the GCSE was to provide a system that catered for a broader spectrum of students, so that all were motivated to achieve their best (Bishop, Bullock, Martin & Thompson, 1999).

GCSE and equivalent qualifications are currently those that are completed before the age of 16 years, which has signified the end of compulsory schooling. Outcomes in these examinations have assumed great importance for individuals, families, and also for educational agencies such as schools, further education institutions and the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The results have had high public visibility, being used as an indicator of the performance of educational institutions.

Bishop et al. (1999) examined perceptions of the GCSE in a range of user groups and found that on the whole, the GCSE was perceived as being of benefit as a preparation and as a means of selection for future courses, and also for careers.

Denscombe (2000) reported that GCSEs constituted a new source of stress in the lives of young adolescents. He wrote that young people felt that GCSEs were the first examinations they took that really mattered in their lives. Another factor contributing to the stress they felt was the burden of coursework and the perceived pressure from teachers to do well. Finally, and perhaps most pertinently, young people felt that GCSE results were of paramount importance in determining their access to further and higher education and, for those who intended to leave education, were crucial in determining access to jobs. Denscombe (2000, p.371) described GCSE outcomes as 'fateful moments' for those involved - as a key juncture in their lives, influencing their future trajectories. Furthermore, Alakeson (2005) reiterated the claim that, from a life chances perspective, the turning point in the educational life cycle has occurred at aged 16 years in the UK.

The studies above focussed on *all* young people taking GCSEs and did not specifically examine perceptions of looked after children. It could be that looked after young people's perceptions of the importance of GCSEs would be differentially affected by their care experiences.

### **2.3.2 Choices at GCSE**

There has been much research related specifically to the choices and experiences faced by *all* young people at GCSE. Students have commented on their preferences with regard to methods of assessment. Woods (2000) found that 61 per cent of students stated a preference for coursework, with 25 per cent preferring practicals and four per cent favouring orals. Some reasons they gave for the preference of coursework were that it afforded more time, was relatively less stressful, and allowed them to put more effort into it. It appeared that in Woods' (2000) study young people were able to consider the types of assessment that best suited them.

Another factor that may have influenced performance at GCSE related to the subject options that young people chose. Kelly (1986) found that for students the major influence on option choice was the perceived usefulness of the subject for getting a job. Other factors, in order of perceived importance were: how interesting the subject was; whether the individual was good at it; careers advice; what parents said about it and what teachers said about it. Hendley, Stables and Stables (1996) also found that reported liking of a subject was associated with enjoyment, ability and usefulness for future career. Their findings were reflected in more recent research in which students chose GCSEs according to their perceptions of the subject's usefulness with regards to future employment (Adey & Biddulph, 2001). Darling and Glendinning (1996) reported that students felt that their own views, as opposed to those of parents or teachers were of primary importance when deciding to study a subject. Although young people in the latter study may have made the final choice themselves, it is unlikely that they had not discussed this with their parents - indeed their parents' views may have influenced their own. Looked after young people would not have this opportunity and this may impact on their experiences of making choices.

### **2.3.3 Support at GCSE**

It was recognised by the DfES Specialist Schools Trust (2004) that all students at GCSE benefited from a personalised approach to study leave to support them before and during their exams, and enable them to fulfill their potential. Some practices that were reported to be helpful to schools were: teacher, parent and student collaboration to establish which students may need additional support; after school and weekend support groups; supervised revision for certain students and student mentoring.

Rowling and Willis (2006) commented on the importance of using data about past attainment to identify students who may benefit from extra support, so that overall school attainment could be raised. They also suggested: teaching borderline students in small groups and using sixth form students to support teaching; using a reduced curriculum timetable for some students so that they



can focus attention on fewer subjects and having a quiet space available for revision.

The literature above has illustrated the importance of examining participation at GCSE, particularly for looked after young people whose care histories may well have involved disruptions to their participation in education. It seemed plausible that looked after students in the present study could have been expected to make the same choices, and have opportunities to benefit from the same range of approaches available to all learners at GCSE. Given their differing circumstances, the perceived significance, and the exact nature of the choices and support that young people judged to be important, was a key concern for the research.

## **2.4 Looked After Young People Compared to Other Populations at GCSE**

### **2.4.1 Attainment of Looked After Young People Compared to All Young People**

Historically there has been a large discrepancy between attainment at GCSE for all children and those looked after, nationally and locally, with looked after young people consistently faring badly. In 2001/2002 only eight per cent of looked after children achieved five or more grade A\*-C GCSEs compared to 50 per cent of all young people (SEU 2003). More recent figures indicated that despite widespread government guidance and policy (see Section 2.5) there still existed a wide gap. Table Four shows the percentages of all young people and those looked after who attained a minimum of five GCSEs in 2007 and 2008, nationally and within the local authority where the present study was conducted.

**Table 4            Attainment at GCSE for all children and those looked after nationally and within the target borough, 2007 and 2008\***

Year	Grade	All children nationally	Looked after children nationally	All children in target borough	Looked after children in target borough
2007	5+ A*-C	61.4%	12.6%	47.2%	9.3% <sup>1</sup>
2007	5+ A*-G	89.9%	43.1%	90%	28%
2008	5+ A*-C	65.3%	13.9%	57.7%	20.8%
2008	5+ A*-G	91.6%	43.4%%	92.7%	50%

\* Source: DCSF (2008b; 2008c; 2009a and 2009b)

It can be seen that the percentage of looked after children attaining the grades shown above at GCSE was very much lower than for all children nationally. GCSE results at grades A\* to C of all young people in the study borough have historically been below the national average. It would, therefore, perhaps be expected that looked after children in the borough would also have attained less well than looked after children nationally, as indeed was true of outcomes in 2007 for all grades, A\* to G. In 2008, however, the percentage of looked after children in the target borough attaining grades A\* to G was higher than for looked after children nationally. A larger proportion of looked after children in the borough participated in GCSEs in 2008 than in 2007, affecting the increase in attainment (see also Section 2.4.3).

It is worth noting here that official statistics must be interpreted with caution, as small sample sizes and fluctuations in the sample can make it difficult to compare annual statistics (Berridge, 2007). In the local authority reported on here, the proportion of looked after children of school age is generally only around one per cent (500-530 children) of all children in the borough. The sample size is very small, making it difficult to compare overall percentages from year to year. At Key Stage Four, however, the number of looked after young people in 2007 was 54 and in 2008 it was 48, indicating there was not a dramatic difference between the size of the cohorts across the two years. Each

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<sup>1</sup> Please note, this figure was a provisional figure provided directly by the local authority and was absent from official government statistics.

cohort also had comparable proportions of young people educated within and outside the borough, and had a similar percentage of young people with statements of special educational needs, 35.2% in 2007 and 35.4% in 2008 (Local Authority, 2008). The striking increase in attainment for looked after young people in the borough in 2008, shown in Table Four, appeared to reflect a genuine improvement rather than fluctuations in the sample size.

In addition, as Berridge (2007) has pointed out, it could be considered unwise to assume that it is being in care itself that jeopardises looked after young people's education. He made the point that factors that led to young people going into care were associated with socio-economic risk factors, such as social class and poverty, and these too predict low educational achievement. It would, therefore, be more informative to compare looked after children to other vulnerable populations, rather than to the population as a whole.

#### **2.4.2 Attainment of Looked After Young People Compared to Other Vulnerable Populations.**

DfES (2006a) data suggested that social class had an impact on GCSE attainment: students with parents in non-manual occupational categories attained consistently better at GCSE than those whose parents worked in the manual sector. Feinstein and Symons (1999) proposed a structural model to account for educational attainment, which included family background variables, schooling and peer group effects. The biggest influence was parental interest, which was correlated with parental education and social class, but which dwarfed the direct effects of these. These authors argued that parental interest influenced educational attainment through motivation, discipline and support.

Webber and Butler (2007) used Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) to examine factors affecting GCSE results. They found that, in addition to pupil attainment in an earlier key stage test, the type of neighbourhood in which a pupil lived was a more reliable predictor of an individual's GCSE performance than any other information held about the pupil on the PLASC database. The authors stated that,

*“PLASC data show that the performance of a secondary school, as measured in terms of average GCSE points per pupil, is likely to be much lower in a deprived inner-city area than in an affluent commuter suburb.”*

Webber and Butler (2007, p.1249).

They argued that exam performance was affected by the social background of people that the young person came into contact with at home and also by the social background of peers in school.

The studies above suggested that social class and deprivation may have influenced attainment and it seemed probable that the lower results of looked after children would also have been mediated by these factors, as Berridge (2007) contends.

Cameron, Bennert, Simon and Wigfall (2007) compared young people who had a background in care with those who had experienced difficulty, but had not been taken into care (the latter group termed, ‘in difficulty’). Their study was carried out shortly after the Children Leaving Care Act (DoH, 2000b) had been implemented. Specifically regarding educational attainment, the authors of the study above reported that there was a higher proportion of care leavers engaged in, or planning to be engaged in, education, than in the group classified as ‘in difficulty’. In addition, half of care leavers were employed in part-time or full-time work, compared to very few young people ‘in difficulty’. It suggested that social deprivation was an important influence on educational outcomes, and the authors argued that young people in care were benefiting from policy and resources to a greater extent than the ‘in difficulty’ group.

It was important to consider whether looked after young people in the target borough of the current study were also benefiting from policy and resources to a greater extent than other vulnerable groups, with respect to attainment at GCSE. The study borough has summarised GCSE results for pupils according to

deprivation factors. These are shown in the table below, taken from figures provided by the local authority Information, Research and Statistics Team<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 5          Looked after young people compared to other vulnerable populations at GCSE, within the target borough\***

<b>Deprivation Measure</b>	<b>Pupils achieving 5+ A*-C.</b>	<b>Pupils achieving 5+ A*-G.</b>
Looked After Children	20.9%	74.4%
Eligible for Free School Meals	34.7%	86.3%
First Language Not English	60.6%	95.9%
Mobile pupils admitted after start of Year 10	29.8%	78.1%
Resident in Neighbourhood Renewal Area	41.4%	86.7%
In Hard Pressed ACORN Category	41.7%	87.5%
In IMD bottom 20%	41.5%	87%
In IDACI bottom 20%	42%	88.2%

\*Source: Local Authority (2007). Key Stage Four Results: Individual School, Borough and Value-Added Analysis.

The group of looked after young people in the target borough attained less well than other deprived groups at GCSE, suggesting that they were not at that time benefiting from policy and resources to a greater extent, unlike those in the study by Cameron and colleagues (2007).

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<sup>2</sup> These results had been validated by schools, but were not yet finalised by the DCSF. Acronyms used are, ACORN (A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods), IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation, and IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index).

### 2.4.3 Participation in GCSE Programmes of Study.

Until now, this discussion of GCSE has focused on attainment at GCSE, but young people can only attain at GCSE if they *participate* in GCSE programmes of study and exams. Around one third of looked after children nationally did not take a single GCSE or equivalent examination in 2007 and 2008 (DCSF, 2008b; 2009b). In the target local authority, 49 per cent of the 54 looked after children eligible to take GCSE (or equivalent) examinations did not do so in 2007. For the 2008 cohort, this figure stood at 25 per cent of 48 young people (DCSF, 2009b; Local Authority, 2009). As mentioned earlier in relation to attainment of the two cohorts at GCSE, the groups had a broadly similar demographic. The differences in participation rates could, therefore, have related to the experiences of support that young people were exposed to. Increased placement stability in 2008, as outlined earlier, may also have impacted to a greater extent on the 2008 cohort. In 2007, the relatively small number of looked after children who took examinations had obvious implications for overall attainment figures, because so many looked after young people did not participate in any examinations of this type. Although participation improved in 2008, 11 young people still did not participate in any GCSEs.

Chamberlain (2008) explored reasons for absence of young people from GCSE examinations. She maintained that absence from lessons in school has often been related to poor relationships with teachers and peers, bullying, lack of interest in the subject, poor quality teaching and low expectations, and went on to argue that absence from lessons inevitably has a negative impact on the likelihood of the student taking the related exam - because they are poorly equipped to do so. Such absence was contextual and could be shaped by a number of familial, socio-economic, environmental and social-psychological factors. Although Chamberlain's research did not look at absence from GCSEs within a looked after sample, her findings are clearly relevant to this type of educationally vulnerable group.

Local and national figures have shown that a large proportion of looked after young people do not take GCSEs, but do not afford an explanation of the reasons preventing them from doing so. The pattern may have related to

unauthorised absence from examinations and may have reflected the number of young people who were not even entered for examinations. Skidmore, Cuff and Leslie (2007) researching for *The Bow Group* commented that official statistics did not report figures for those young people in the general population who were out of school and who, therefore, did not take exams, because the government was simply not aware of the figures. Official statistics relating to *looked after children* out of school have been even harder to come by. Whether looked after young people nationally and locally have not gained GCSEs because they were absent from exams or because they were not entered for exams, it is not acceptable that so many were not afforded the opportunity to participate.

The research reported here focuses on the experiences of those that have participated in GCSEs, and so cannot address the question of why so many looked after young people do not gain GCSE qualifications. However, by investigating the experiences of those who have taken GCSEs alongside their age related peers, it offers a useful step towards understanding the issues contributing toward participation of looked after young people at GCSE, and thus toward understanding and tackling their attainment.

## **2.5 Government Guidance, Policy and Practice**

As mentioned in Chapter One, in recent years there has been much government interest in the educational lives of looked after young people and many initiatives have been implemented in a bid to close the gap between attainment of looked after young people and all young people.

The *Quality Protects* (DoH, 1998) initiative was established to deliver the Government's objectives for all children's social care services, with the aim of ensuring better outcomes for children and making clear the role that social services should play in promoting and meeting these outcomes. The objectives included promoting placement stability, improving educational and healthcare opportunities, listening to children's needs and improving the skills of the social care worker.

*Joint Guidance* was established by the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health (2000), specifically to target education for looked after children. The guidance called for a nominated 'champion' for children in care with the aim of promoting inter-agency working, the implementation of Personal Education Plans for children in care, the appointment of a designated teacher in schools to promote the interests of looked after children and a time limit of 20 school days to find an education placement for children in care who change schools. According to this guidance, Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are a key tool to ensuring that better planning takes place for looked after young people in their education as part of an attempt to raise the profile of this issue across local authority departments.

The *Care Standards Act* (DoH, 2000a) set out national minimum standards for providers of care, including fostering services and children's homes, with a requirement to prioritise education. *The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000* (DoH) ensured that every young person, who was in or leaving care at the age of 16-17 years, would have a personal adviser and a pathway plan to set out their goals and needs and to ensure that provision was made to help them to achieve their targets. It also extended the length of time young people could expect to receive assistance relating to education, training and employment to 21 years, or if they are completing education or training, until the age of 24 years.

Despite these initiatives the attainment of looked after children continued to fail to match that of children in the general population. The Government commissioned the Social Exclusion Unit (2003) to analyse the problem, talk to children in care and staff, and deliver cross-government plans. The study took place alongside government guidance and legislation to improve life chances for all children. *Every Child Matters* (2003) set out to support families and carers, promote early identification and intervention, improve accountability and increase integration of services and bring about workforce reform. The SEU (2003) study proposed that support for looked after children should focus on improving stability, improving attendance at school, giving more help with schoolwork, helping carers to support education of children in their care and improving the health and well-being of looked after children. These aims were to be met through planning, prioritising looked after children in local government



policies, supporting looked after children, advocating for looked after children, training and support for social workers, carers and teachers and using data more efficiently and effectively to inform service improvements.

The subsequent *Children Act* (2004) made it the duty of local authorities to promote the education of children in care. The most recent reform was set out in the *Care Matters* Green Paper (DfES, 2006b) and subsequent White Papers (DfES, 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) and in *The Children and Young Persons Act* (2008). Of particular relevance to school-aged children, local authorities now had the power to direct schools to admit children in care, even when the school was already fully subscribed. Children in care who experienced a placement move were entitled to free transport to school so that they could remain in the same school. Schools were encouraged to use personalisation funding that was available to use with all children to ensure that they offered an excellent personalised education to children in care, supported with a budget of £500 per looked after child per year specifically to target education, provided through social workers. *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) ensured a focus in schools on the progression of children in care, by putting the role of the designated teacher on a statutory footing and supporting this through training and statutory guidance on their role and responsibilities. In addition, eleven local authorities were identified to pilot the role of a 'virtual head teacher', whose role was to support schools in their work with children in care and build networks between schools and other education providers, and social workers. *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) also introduced a new requirement that the local authority must ensure that care planning decisions do not disrupt a child's education, and stipulated that they must not move schools in Years 10 or 11 except in exceptional circumstances.

It is too early to gauge the impact of the most recent policy at a national or local level. Although looked after young people in the study reported here were not asked to comment explicitly on aspects of the policy that they have benefited from, the interviews did afford a greater insight into how such national policy was being enacted at a local level.

## 2.6 Listening to the Voice of Young People

*"States Parties should assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."*

(UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990).

The premise above was reflected in *The Children Act* (1989) and *The Children and Young Persons Act* (2008), and highlighted that not only was it important to listen to children and young people, but that there was a statutory obligation to do so. DfES (2007a) stated that as part of their pledge to look after young people, local authorities could consider that young people should have;

*"The right to have their voice heard and influence the work of the local authority through participation in a 'Children in Care Council'.*

(DfES, 2007a, p.11).

The comments made clear government's commitment to eliciting, and acting upon, the views of young people when considering policy decisions that would affect their lives. The Social Exclusion Unit (2003) stated that listening to children should take place when planning for individuals, and for wider council policies. They noted that listening to young people in a proper forum raised self-esteem, and also helped to generate ideas to support others in their lives and with their education.

McLeod (2007) said that it is important to pay attention to the balance of power when seeking the views of young people. Dialogue with young people who are disaffected can be hard to achieve, as the young person can show resistance to the adult agenda in the interaction, and can attempt to assert their own power over proceedings. She claimed that agencies often 'pay lip service' to the idea

of participation, commenting that if they wished to truly hear what young people had to say, they had to seek creative ways of eliciting young people's views. McLeod (2007) also highlighted the importance of acting on the views obtained. Young people whose wishes were not acted upon in her study felt that they had not really been listened to. Establishing the rapport necessary to enable young people to trust adults sufficiently to share their views has been shown to be time consuming, but also imperative. Developing a trusting relationship with participants in the study reported here was seen as vital.

Studies have shown the importance and value of using the views of looked after young people themselves to determine the support that they need. For example, general guidance has suggested that young people themselves should be involved in the process of drawing up Personal Education Plans (DfEE/DoH, 2000). Harker et al. (2004) however reported that only 42% of young people in their study were aware of PEPs, and even less actually had one. They concluded that PEPs were devalued because of the lack of any meaningful involvement on behalf of the young people themselves. Many studies (e.g. A National Voice, 2007; Ajayi and Quigley, 2006; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge & Sinclair, 2003; Harker et al., 2004; Munro, 2001 and Timms & Thoburn, 2006) have asked looked after young people directly about various aspects of their care and educational experiences. Although these have not generally focused on the educational phase of GCSEs, they have suggested the value of learning from looked after young people's individual experiences.

White (2007) did interview looked after young people in Year 10 specifically about their views of support at GCSE. He argued that,

*"there may be potential in pursuing how young people perceive different elements of, and approaches to, support, as a means of exploring what works best for individuals experiencing different circumstances and contexts"*

(White, 2007, p.35).

Although the report contains a wealth of information about looked after young people's views of support at GCSE, it is not clear how White (2007) analysed this information, and it appears to be largely anecdotal. In addition, unlike the study reported here, he interviewed young people in Year 10, *before* they had finished their GCSE programmes of study. At this stage it may not have been possible for young people to have identified the support that they might later benefit from.

Jackson and Martin (1998) used a questionnaire approach to elicit the views of a looked after sample and followed this up with in-depth interviews with a sub-sample. Martin and Jackson (2002) followed up the same sample when they were 26 years old, and asked them to reflect on their experiences at school in order to suggest ways in which they felt they could have been better supported by social work and care practices. The research presented here examined looked after young people's views of education and GCSEs shortly after they had completed GCSEs, unlike Martin and Jackson's (2002) sample who considered experiences at GCSE in retrospect. It also focused on those who had remained in school and taken GCSEs, and so encompassed a broader sample than Jackson and Martin's (1998) earlier work focussing on those with five or more GCSEs at grade C or above. It specifically sought to examine more recent experiences of participation at GCSE and possible sources of support that looked after young people have benefited from. It was hoped that these insights would contribute toward policy and practice in the target borough so that more looked after young people take GCSEs in future populations. In this way the views of young people would be acted upon, so that they could feel that they had been listened to, and that their participation was meaningful.

## **2.7 Aims and Objectives of the Current Research**

As noted in Chapter One, the overarching aim of the study was to learn from looked after young people's experiences of education from starting school to taking GCSEs, using methods that valued their individual perspectives of those experiences, whilst focusing in detail on educational experiences at the time of taking GCSE programmes of study. The specific objectives for the study were twofold:

1. To identify the protective and risk factors that young people considered to have contributed to their experiences of participating in GCSE programmes of study and exams.
2. To develop recommendations about support for looked after young people's participation in GCSE programmes of study and exams, including:
  - specific recommendations for the Educational Psychology Service in the borough; and
  - wider recommendations for policy and practice development in the borough as a whole.

## Chapter Three - Methodology

This chapter sets out the epistemological and ontological position of the research. It delineates the specific approach to data collection and analysis used and its' relation to the research aims and objectives. Details of the sample and the methods used to collect and analyse data will also be discussed.

### 3.1 Epistemological and Ontological Considerations.

From a philosophical point of view, an idealist epistemology would challenge the notion of the existence of a 'real world'. From a psychological, or social science, perspective, it is not the concept of the 'real world' per se that is important. Rather, the premise is that it is our subjective experience that is considered to be the most important reality (Hayes, 2000). As outlined in Chapter One, the research reported here forms part of a programme of study that is underpinned with Symbolic Interactionist assumptions (Blumer, 1986). The ontological position of the research was based on the philosophical assumption that what respondents say does have significance for them, and is based on *their* 'reality'. Thus, something is real when it is constructed in the minds of the actors involved in the situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). In qualitative studies, researchers are embracing the idea of multiple realities (Cresswell, 2007), a standpoint that bears in mind that experiences are unique to each individual and that individuals make sense of their experiences in different ways. In this way it is 'reality' for the individuals concerned that is valued and explored, which is said to constitute a relativist ontology, with an emphasis on participants' subjective account of an experience (Willig, 2001). A Symbolic Interactionist perspective goes beyond that emphasis and recognises that a subject's account will be influenced by interactions between actors in the social world.

In keeping with the philosophy outlined above, a qualitative approach was considered to be most appropriate in order to address the research question. The aim of qualitative researchers is to understand how individuals make sense of the world, and how they experience events (Willig, 2001). A phenomenological approach emphasises the need to view events through the

eyes of the people directly involved, so that the meaning of the event can be construed (Hayes, 2000).

It is important to note that qualitative methods encompass a range of different epistemological positions and techniques for collecting and analysing data (Willig, 2001). Researchers using qualitative methods have a duty to:

*“make their epistemological position clear, conduct their research in a manner consistent with that position, and present their findings in a way that allows them to be evaluated properly”.*

(Madill, Jordan and Shirley, 2000, p.17).

According to the authors above, research that is based on the assumption that all knowledge is contextual and dependent on the unique perspectives of different groups of participants (as is the case here) could be considered to take a ‘contextual constructionist’ approach, that is situated between the two extremes of realism and constructionism and,

*“acknowledges the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality.’”*

(Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.81).

Epistemologically speaking, qualitative research involves getting as close to the participants as possible. Researchers conduct their studies ‘in the field’ and the relationship between the researcher and the material being studied is seen as interrelated (Cresswell, 2007). For qualitative studies, the values that a researcher brings to the study are not viewed as problematic, as they would be for a researcher making more positivist assumptions. The researcher’s own values and ideas impinge on the process of obtaining and making sense of data. Interpretation, by the researcher, of the meanings attributed to events is a

feature of qualitative psychology. There is also an emphasis on validity rather than reliability, meaning that the research does not claim to produce results which could be exactly replicated, at a later date, or with another sample or researcher. Rather, the aim is to develop a true understanding of the area under investigation, focussing on information from those who experience the phenomena, and their interaction with the researcher (Hayes, 2000).

## **3.2 Methodology**

In order to determine the most appropriate methodological approach for the research, several qualitative methodologies were considered. These included five approaches outlined by Cresswell (2007): (i) narrative inquiry (see also e.g. Webster & Mertova, 2007); (ii) interpretive phenomenological analysis (see also e.g. Smith & Osborn, 2003); (iii) grounded theory (see also e.g. Hendry, Mayer & Kloep, 2007; Pandit, 1996); (iv) ethnography; and (v) case study-based analysis. Each of these was reviewed but judged not to provide an appropriate fit with the research aims.

Thematic Analysis, however, offers a suitable approach to qualitative analysis in psychology (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Hayes, 2000) and on the basis of the methodological review, it was decided that this technique should be used to analyse interviews with young people in the present study, as this offered the most appropriate match to the aims of the research. It is a flexible approach that can be used to identify, analyse and identify themes or patterns within data. Braun and Clarke (2006) claimed that thematic analysis is used widely in qualitative research, but often not acknowledged as such. Rather, it is claimed as something else, or not identified as a particular method at all. They argued that grounded theory methods in studies often use a set of procedures that is actually a thematic analysis, rather than analysis aimed at development of a theory (e.g. Cooper & McIntyre, 1993 and Day, Carey & Surgenor, 2006). Braun and Clarke stated that Thematic Analysis as a methodology in its own right overcomes the problems faced by researchers who wish to identify and analyse themes in the data, but who do not, or are not able to, subscribe to the theoretical commitments of theoretical sampling and production of a theory, required of a grounded theory analysis.



A number of decisions were made before embarking on the collection of data. According to the model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) it is necessary to determine whether the primary aim of the research is to provide a rich description across the entire data set, identifying predominant themes, or whether the analysis is intended to provide a more detailed in-depth account of one particular theme. In the research reported here, the aim was to identify, code and analyse themes to reflect the content of the whole data set, in relation to a broad research question, namely: What are looked after young people's perceptions of their experiences of education leading to them taking GCSEs?

A key distinction is made in thematic analysis between *theoretical* and *inductive* identification of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive analysis would mean that the themes are identified without reference to previous research in the area. It is a process of coding the data without trying to make it fit into themes that the researcher has preconceived. To some extent, inductive analysis assumes that the researcher has no prior knowledge or experience in the field. A theoretical analysis is influenced by the researcher's prior theoretical knowledge, and does not render it problematic for the researcher to have pre-determined key ideas that may be identified in the data. The research reported here does not conform to either of these more purist views. The bounds of completing a professional doctorate meant that a review of relevant literature had already been undertaken as part of the programme of study. Moreover, the author's professional training and practice offered relevant personal experience of work with looked after children. As prior knowledge and experience cannot be denied when carrying out research, a theoretical analysis was indicated. However, as pointed out by Willig (2001), the use of researcher-generated categories is not compatible with qualitative research seeking to explore meanings. Such qualitative research needs to have enough flexibility to allow new categories of meaning to be identified, as was the aim in the current research. The thematic analysis undertaken here allowed for both theoretically driven coding and inductive emergence of themes.

### 3.3 Data Collection

#### 3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviewing.

Semi-structured interviews are widely used in flexible, qualitative designs and are particularly useful for studies that focus on the meanings of experiences for individuals (Robson, 2002). The present research employed semi-structured interviews as they allowed young people to talk freely and openly, and afforded the opportunity to clarify information and follow up on interesting points.

Willig (2001) outlined the use of semi-structured interviews that are directed by the research question, but that provide the researcher with an opportunity to hear participants talk about aspects of their lives and experience. These interviews allow a researcher to, *“understand experiences and reconstruct events in which (they) did not participate.”* (Rubin & Rubin, 2005 p.3).

In the present study it was necessary to find a balance between ensuring that information obtained was relevant to the research question, whilst also affording space for the interviewee to describe what was relevant to them. It allowed new insights to be generated and identified. Interview agendas for a semi-structured interview can consist of a small number of open-ended questions. Researchers can also identify topic headings as a scaffold for asking questions through the course of an interview, without recourse to a pre-set established agenda. Such an approach was used by Taylor and Ussher (2001), who stated that:

*“Open ended semi-structured format questions were used flexibly, being omitted, adapted or elaborated according to the demands of the individual context”*

(Taylor & Ussher, 2001, p. 296).

For the present study, topic headings were identified in relation to the research literature, and used as a guide for the interview (See Appendix Two). It included the topics of: friendships; transitions; relationships with adults (foster carers, teaching staff, social care staff); out of school activities and experiences of education and school, including support that was available. In Chapter Two,

aspects of these factors were outlined as risk and protective factors for looked after children in education, and in relation to their wider well-being. The research reported here aimed to explore whether the young people in the present study felt that these were important areas in relation to their participation in GCSEs, and also allowed them to identify other events or experiences that were important to them. As more interviews were conducted, questions relating to areas that previous interviewees had raised could be incorporated. Examples included the specific content of the GCSE courses undertaken, whether coursework or exam; and the experience of choosing 'options' for GCSEs at the end of Year 9. Interviews also explored behaviour and support specifically related to GCSEs.

Questions were used in a conversational manner, aimed at promoting a two-way dialogue and empowering young people (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). The establishment of rapport was aided by using features of an informal conversation, such as open-ended questions and an emphasis on narrative and experience. In addition, concrete non-intrusive questions, about matters such as the schools attended by young people, were used at the outset before moving on to more personal matters when the interviewee appeared more comfortable (Willig, 2001). Participants were asked to talk about their experiences of school, from the beginning of their school lives to the present day, with a particular focus on things that they perceived as helpful. As they talked, questions were asked to encourage elaboration where events or experiences were not fully described. Individuals were not asked about personal events if it was felt that this could potentially cause distress. For example, if the young people themselves did not offer information about the personal experiences that led to them becoming 'looked after' they were not asked for more information about it.

### **3.3.2 Participants**

At the planning stage of the current research in April 2008, looked after young people in the target borough who had taken or not taken GCSEs in 2007 were the intended sample. The latter group are reported to be a difficult sample to access (Munro, Holmes & Ward, 2005), and at an early stage it proved very difficult to contact any young people who had been eligible to take GCSEs but

had not done so. Available information from the local authority indicated that individuals had not taken GCSEs for a number of reasons, including school exclusion, being disengaged with education, being young offenders and serving custodial sentences, or attending alternative educational provisions where GCSE (or equivalent) programmes of study were not available. Within the limited timeframe of the research, the decision was taken to focus solely on those individuals who did participate in GCSE exams. In order to increase the sample size, additional participants were recruited from the 2008 GCSE cohort after they had taken their GCSEs in July 2008.

Participants in the study reported here were young people who had taken GCSEs or equivalent programmes of study, who had been looked after for at least 12 months before that time, and who were still in public care when participating in GCSE examinations (the latter, with the exception of one individual<sup>3</sup>). The GCSE outcomes for that specific sample are provided to the Department for Children, Schools and Families, by the local authority, on an annual basis, so the information was readily available.

Names of all young people who had completed or not completed GCSEs in 2007 were made available in April 2008, once ethical approval for the research had been granted. Limited access to a database containing personal information was permitted. Social workers in the local authority had access to another database containing recent address information and telephone contacts for young people. Access to that system was not granted to the researcher, because the Head of Social Services was keen to ensure that, as the corporate parent, the social worker had spoken to such young people about the research beforehand and requested their permission to pass on telephone contact details if they were interested in taking part. The potential sample at the outset constituted a total of 25 young people who had participated in GCSEs and 24 who had not. Of these 49 young people, up-to-date address details were

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<sup>3</sup> During interview, it transpired that one of the young people identified by a school's designated teacher for looked after children had returned to the family home at the time of taking GCSEs. This young person had, however, spent a considerable part of their life in foster care and it was decided that the information would still be used in the analysis as the young person had given up their time to take part and the interview yielded interesting responses.

available for 13 who had taken GCSEs and 18 who had not. The remainder had no address details available on the limited access database. Letters (Appendix Three) were sent to the 31 young people for whom contact details were accessible, with an opportunity to opt in or out of further contact, an information sheet (Appendix Four), and a pre-paid envelope addressed to the researcher (within the Educational Psychology Service). The letter also requested that the young person provide telephone contact details if they agreed to take part.

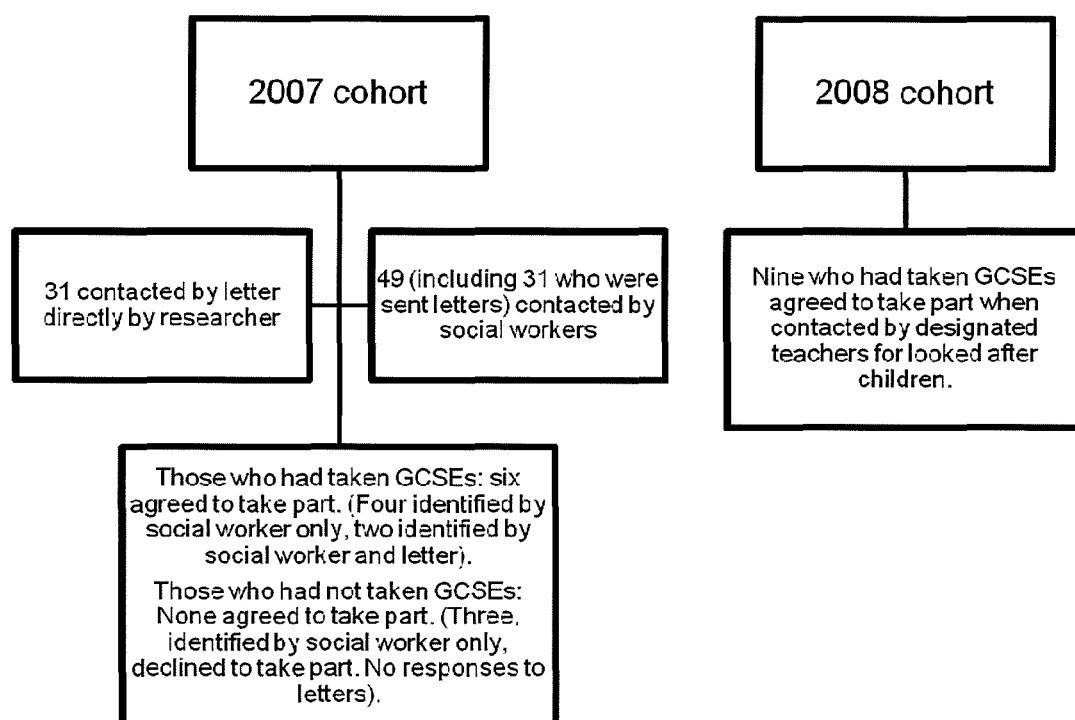
In July 2008, after the 2008 GCSE cohort had completed their examinations, the researcher contacted the designated teachers for looked after children in all secondary schools in the local authority. They were provided with the information sheet and asked all young people fitting the criteria who had been on roll in their school if they would be interested in taking part.

To support and supplement this sampling strategy, the researcher also attended several social worker team meetings, between April and August 2008, to tell social work staff about the research, answer any questions, and to request that they invite young people fitting sampling criteria to take part. Information sheets were provided so that social workers could share details about the research.

The research relied on the social workers, and designated teachers for looked after children to invite young people who completed GCSEs to take part, or on the young people themselves replying to the letters that were sent. The challenges of accessing a sample in this way have been well documented as mentioned earlier (e.g. Munro et al., 2005). Email and telephone contact with individual social workers and designated teachers was initiated on a frequent basis to determine whether any young people had been approached and had agreed to be interviewed.

The diagram overleaf (Figure 1) shows the methods of accessing the sample and the number of participants that were identified through each route.

Figure 1 - Identification of the sample



During interview young people were asked for permission for their GCSE results to be shared and these were obtained directly from the local authority if they consented (see Table Six for results). Young people had been entered for different numbers of GCSE or equivalent programmes of study according to their personal circumstances and to their level of special educational need.

Although the focus of the current study was on participation at GCSE, rather than attainment, information about their results is presented for contextual purposes and to demonstrate the range of educational outcomes for looked after young people who participated in GCSE exams in the borough.

**Table 6 GCSE results of participants in the current study**

Participant	Gender	Grades	Participant	Gender	Grades
1	Male	6 D-G	9	Female	8 D-G
2	Male	2 D-G	10	Female	8 A-C 3 D-G
3	Male	2 A*-C 9 D*-G	11	Female	4 D-G
4	Female	6 A*-C 3 D*-G	12	Female	1.5 D-G <sup>4</sup>
5	Female	1 A*-C 6 D-G	13	Male	7 A*-C 1 D-G
6	Female	2 A*-C 2 D-G	14	Male	7 A*-C 5 D-G
7	Female	4 D-G	15	Male	5 A*-C 6 D-G
8	Female	2 A*-C 5 D-G			

### 3.3.3 Other Preparatory Work

In April 2008, a focus group with looked after young people engaged in another study took place within the local authority and the researcher in the present study obtained permission to speak to the group, to ensure that the information sheet provided for young people was transparent and accessible, and to facilitate consideration of the development of rapport with such a vulnerable sample.

Ethical permission was granted by the Institute of Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee. Particular points covered in the application included ensuring that participants had been provided with enough information to give informed consent and that they were fully debriefed as to how the information would be used. Participants were made aware that they could choose to decline answers

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<sup>4</sup> Intermediate GNVQ Language Unit, Foundation GNVQ Language Unit and GCSE (Short Course) were equivalent to a half GCSE.

to any question and that they could terminate the interview at any time. The research also adhered to the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2006) and Local Authority policies and procedures, as well as the requirements of the Data Protection Act (1998). Permission from the Head of Social Services was secured before embarking on the interviews. Consent to take part in the research was obtained from participants themselves and was not sought from individual social workers, foster carers or parents, because all participants were over 16 years of age and deemed able to give informed consent according to the principle of the 'Gillick' competency (*Gillick v. West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority* [1985] AC 112).

### **3.3.4 Procedure**

Once a young person had agreed to their contact details being shared, they were contacted to discuss the research and to arrange a place and a time for the interview to be conducted, if they were still willing to take part. For young people who had been contacted directly by their school and had agreed to take part, interviews were conducted at the convenience of the young person and school staff, on the school premises. All other interviews were conducted in a location that was deemed safe for all parties.

At the outset, young people were asked to read the information sheet and sign a consent form if they agreed that they had understood the purpose and format of the interview. They were also asked if they would consent to the interview being recorded using a digital voice recorder. All interviews were recorded and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes.

A timeline ranging from 'the start of school' to 'today' was drawn on paper and was available to the participant to note down key points if desired and to assist in ordering events and experiences, as the interview took place. In practice, it was used only when a young person was having some difficulty in ordering past events in their mind.

At the end of each interview, young people were invited to add any further comment and give feedback about their experience of the interview, making it



possible to determine whether the young person was likely to require emotional support from a personal or professional source and to signpost the relevant services if necessary. Young people were also asked to nominate a shop from which they would like to receive a voucher to the value of £15 to thank them for giving up their time. The voucher was sent to them in the post within three days of completing the interview.

Verbatim transcripts of each interview were produced and sent to interviewees within four months of the interview being conducted. Interviewees could comment on the accuracy and content of the transcript and ask for information to be change or removed if they wished (see Appendix Five for a sample transcript).

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were subject to a thematic analysis. According to Boyatzis (1998), a theme can be identified at a manifest level, or a latent level. These levels are termed semantic and latent, respectively, by Braun and Clarke (2006). At a semantic level, themes are identified from the explicit or surface meaning of the data. The information given by the interview is taken at face value and themes are drawn directly from what is said. Data are organised to show patterns in the semantic content and are then interpreted. An analysis at the latent level involves interpretation before developing the themes, going beyond what has directly been said and beginning to consider the underlying ideas and assumptions that could have influenced the semantic content. The two levels of analysis, semantic and latent, could be said to map onto an essentialist/realist approach, and a constructionist approach, respectively. The present study worked within a less purist 'contextualist' tradition, as described earlier. In relation to the development of themes it means that they were identified at a semantic level, focussed on the meanings and experience articulated by young people themselves, whilst also acknowledging that the interpretation of these experiences is influenced by the broader social context.

The research followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines on thematic analysis, as follows:

- **Familiarising yourself with the data**

Transcription of the interviews lent itself to a reasonable level of familiarisation with the material. Each transcript was then read and re-read a number of times, with interesting ideas being noted each time. The transcripts were stored on NVivo 7.

- **Generating initial codes**

A line-by-line analysis of each transcript was undertaken using the printed copies. Further analysis used NVivo, and at that stage the line-by-line codes were used to identify the main code that made sense for the section of text. Each section of text was coded and tagged and the same unit of text could be included in more than one category (see also Frith & Gleeson, 2004). Units of text belonging to the same category were grouped together, thus collating data relevant to each code. When each new code was identified, the entire data set was examined for existence of data belonging to that code. Here several codes were shared with two experienced researchers to ensure that they captured what they purported to capture, and that all of the data under each code, from different transcripts, reflected the same type of information. Several codes were subsequently amalgamated with others or discarded if they were felt upon further consideration not to match the data extracts. Certain codes were only present in one data source, meaning that only one young person mentioned information of that type. Where it was not applicable to merge these into other codes these were retained, as it was felt that they reflected unique information that was extremely pertinent to that particular individual. These also afforded insight into the range and diversity of young people's experiences and perspectives.

- **Searching for themes**

The next stage involved organising the codes into potential themes and drawing together all the coded extracts within the identified theme,

focussing analysis at a consideration of how different codes may fit together under a broader overarching theme. Mind maps were used to help the researcher to think about the relationships between codes, themes and main themes and sub-themes. Here some initial codes were extended and some were discarded. Following that process, all extracts of data were coded according to a number of main and sub themes. Again, these were shared with two experienced researchers to ensure that the themes identified were robust.

- **Reviewing themes**

Themes were reviewed to ensure that data within a theme was correctly placed and that all the selected extracts formed a coherent pattern. Where extracts did not fit, the theme was investigated again to ensure that it was not the theme itself that was inadequate. Themes were refined, created or discarded accordingly and extracts were moved as appropriate. Once the themes were deemed to 'capture' the coded data, the entire data set was re-read to ensure that the themes worked across all of the data. Any additional data that was missed in earlier coding was also incorporated at that point. Once the thematic map that was produced was deemed to represent a 'good enough' reflection of the data, the next step of the analysis was undertaken.

- **Defining and naming themes**

The final phase involved defining, refining and naming the themes. These will be presented in the next chapter. In total, four themes were indicated. Themes were generally broad and were comprised of a number of smaller sub themes. Full details of themes, sub-themes and related codes are shown in Appendix Six.

## **Chapter Four – Results**

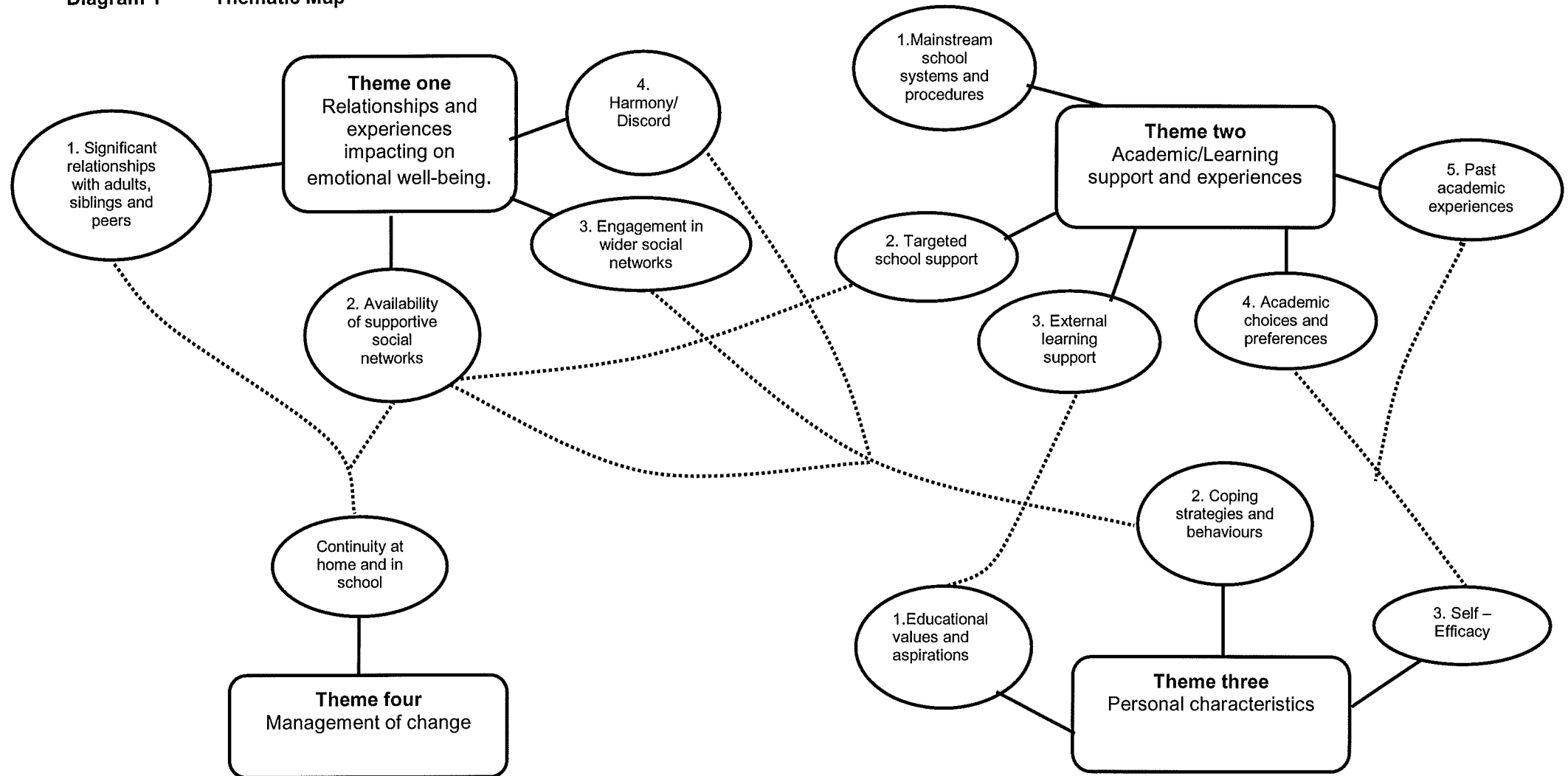
This chapter outlines the codes and themes that were generated from the interview data, with extracts selected for illustrative purposes. It aims only to illustrate themes with descriptive comment. Theoretical and practical considerations with relevant literature and research will be given precedence in the following chapters. Quotations have been attributed to individuals by ascribing a number to each, corresponding to the participant information in Chapter Three (see Table Six).

### **4.1 Overview of Themes and Sub-themes**

Four themes emerged from the interview data. Relationships were salient and ranged from significant personal relationships with others, to the wider social networks that young people accessed. Academic support and experiences were felt to have contributed to young people's participation in GCSEs, and reflected the ways that different schools responded to their individual needs. Personal characteristics differed from one individual to another, highlighting the heterogeneity of the sample (also noted by Sinclair, Baker, Lee & Gibbs, 2007) and the ways in which these characteristics were influenced by other factors. The management of placement change and other aspects of the care system were also felt to have impacted on experiences of education for this group. Although each theme was felt to account for distinct factors of relevance to young people, there was overlap between them, highlighting the inter-relatedness of some of the experiences that young people had and their personal characteristics or care circumstances.

The thematic map (Diagram 1) outlining all themes and sub-themes, and the links between them is shown overleaf. Each theme, with its constituent sub-themes and categories is illustrated at the outset of the related section. The categories are made up of one or more of the individual codes shown in Appendix Five.

**Diagram 1      Thematic Map**



## **4.2 Theme One – Relationships and Experiences Impacting on Emotional Well-being.**

Many comments related to the feelings and mental health of young people and the ways in which other people and experiences could affect their states of mind. This theme included relationships with adults and other young people that were significant. It also incorporated comments showing that young people valued relationships in their wider social networks, as a source of support.

Box One outlines the sub-themes and categories of Theme One. The sub-themes are considered individually and are illustrated with examples from interviews with young people.

**Box 1. Theme One. Relationships and experiences impacting on emotional well-being: sub-themes and categories**

- **Significant/Attachment relationships**
  - Relationships with adults.
  - Relationships with peers and siblings.
- **Availability of supportive social networks**
  - Availability of friends, foster carer/residential staff, teaching staff and social workers.
  - Unavailability of parents and social workers.
- **Engagement in wider social networks**
  - Taking part in recreational activities.
  - Taking part in school drama productions.
  - Being part of a religious group.
- **Harmony/Discord**
  - Discordant relationships with family members, peers and teachers.
  - 'Getting on well' with others.

#### 4.2.1 Significant/Attachment Relationships

This sub-theme considered comments made about relationships that appeared to provide support and enhance the emotional well-being of individuals. Separation and loss of these relationships invoked distress and pain. These relationships were of significance to young people in that they impacted on their feelings of security, safety and comfort.

##### *Relationships with adults*

Four young people commented on the supportive nature of relationships with their foster carers and the stability that these relationships provided for them.

One girl mentioned that when she was distressed, the foster parents had a key role in helping her to feel secure once more:

*...the foster family would settle you down and that....and you'd get over it by the next day. (Participant 10, female).*

Others talked about the environment that was created by the foster family, providing a safe, stable place for them. For example:

*...everything here was what I needed it to be as well, like a good place to be, and people surrounding me to make it more homely. (Participant 3, male).*

Another young male spoke of being disciplined by his foster carer, when discussing his feelings of stability in the foster home. His comments suggested that even less positive aspects of being cared for and parented, like being disciplined, were viewed as contributing toward security:

*So in Year 8 when you moved into foster care, how did that impact on your education do you think? (Interviewer)*

*It relieved my stress a lot...I just focussed on my work a lot more, and [foster care] grounded me a few times if I didn't...if I mucked around and stuff so.... (Participant 15, male).*

Three young people went beyond a description of the security provided by foster carers, to actually stating that foster carers were like parents to them.

*Cos I've been here...I've been here in this family...these are my family do you know what I mean? I mean I call [foster carer] mum. She's my mum. (Participant 1, male).*

*She was good. I don't know what to say about that. She was just....everything...my mum, dad...(Participant 8, female).*

These extracts indicated the presence and perceived importance of lasting, warm relationships with a foster carer. Three young people, including two who lived in residential care, mentioned similar relationships with adults in other contexts. It seemed that in the absence of a foster carer, young people were able to turn to adults in school and develop meaningful relationships with them.

*Because...basically she is like a mother to me, basically, so because of her I was focussing in quite a lot of subjects. (Participant 11, female).*

*...she kind of took position of...I can't really call her a mother, but someone like an advocate, someone who you can actually go to, and talk to.... (Participant 4, female).*

Although the young girl in the latter extract above expressly said that this adult was not a mother figure, she did represent a significant figure to her. These relationships were characterised as enduring even when the young person was no longer attending the particular school.

Four individuals mentioned maintaining links with key school staff members:

*And I still speak to her. I spoke to her this morning actually. (Participant 4, female). [This young person had been to collect her AS results that morning, and had spoken to the adult to share her news].*

*Good man, isn't it mum? Good man. And I'm still with him now kind of thing so..... (Participant 1, male).*

A small number (4) of young people referred to contact that they had maintained



with their biological families, and it appeared that these relationships were salient to them.

*I just rung my dad, and I said, 'I need you to pick me up', and I stayed round his house and we bonded and we've come closer a lot more as well.  
(Participant 10, female).*

Five young people commented on being separated from their parents, with three recalling it as a very distressing experience, suggesting that they perceived the relationship with parents as significant, despite being looked after by the state.

*I was scared. I didn't stop crying because I thought my mum was joking about it but she didn't. So I kept screaming for my mum so I was scared.  
(Participant 7, female)*

*It was so hard. Just being away from her. (Participant 1, male).*

### *Relationships with peers and siblings*

In addition to these key relationships with adults, many (7) young people discussed long-term relationships with friends that appeared to provide them with comfort and security. Again, these relationships were characterised by longevity and support:

*...we are still like good friends. I'm glad I have someone who we have shared our childhoods together...so it's cool. (Participant 4, female).*

*I've only got two friends that I actually go out with....they're my only really two friends really and truly. Like proper close to me. They support me a lot....I need that support. (Participant 1, male).*

At times, young people had lost friendships or relationships that were important to them and this was a distressing experience. One girl experienced differences of interest with some of her closest peers as they entered adolescence and as their friendship waned she keenly felt the loss:

*We had so much in common. And we don't speak now...to this day...we don't speak today...now. And because we spent two years together, we*

*seemed like we would know each other all our lives, that's what it felt like. But....I do miss them...I do miss them nowadays.....That hurt me a lot. That hurt me a lot...I'd say more than my family.....we were so close, and they were like the two sisters I never had. (Participant 10, female).*

This young person had been in foster care for a time and had returned to live with her mother who had since separated from her father. Her friendship with these girls may have taken on additional significance for her as it bridged the period of transition from foster care back to her birth family.

Another young person commented on others living in her residential home. Although she maintained that she was not 'attached' to the peers she referred to, it appeared that the separation was still an upsetting experience:

*...different kids go and come, and I don't really get attached to anyone, but sometimes like....you're settled with someone, and it's just like they've gone, and I'm still here. (Participant 4, female).*

The pattern of valuing the continuity of relationships and feeling distress at separation, was reflected in relationships with siblings, which appeared to have provided vital support at difficult times:

*The first day they put [my sister] and me sleeping in the same room. I wanted to sleep with my sister. I didn't like my own bed so I'd sleep with my sister. (Participant 7, female).*

*He looked after me when I was at school. He used to look after me. And my older brothers looked after me... (Participant 2, male).*

One girl commented that she had always been close to her siblings and going into foster care without them was extremely difficult:

*It was hard because I was away from my sisters and my brother and I was living all the way in [place], and they were in [place]. (Participant 6, female).*

#### **4.2.2 Availability of Supportive Social Networks**

This sub-theme included comments relating to others being available, or perceived as available, to listen and talk to young people when they felt they

needed them. This emerged as a sub-theme, as many young people mentioned 'talking' as a means of support in solving problems or feelings of distress. It appeared to be important that individuals could decide for themselves when and if to access this support. It was distinct from adult academic support, as it tended to feature 'talking' rather than a specific action. Young people also used this as a support in all aspects of their lives, and not just in relation to schoolwork.

#### *Availability of teaching staff*

At times a member of school staff had identified that the young person was in need of support. Five young people commented on this:

*....one teacher started to notice, and that's when I had been moved into care, so she was really helpful and she really looked after me. (Participant 4, female).*

Members of teaching staff were also perceived as available to talk to when individuals were upset, with nine young people citing this:

*Say if I was feeling upset, say I came in in the morning and I was feeling upset, I would just go to his office....all I had to do was just knock on his office door, and I would go in and I would sit down, and he'd be like, 'Do you want something to drink?', and I'd be like, 'Yes sir', and he'd give me something to drink and I'd just sit there and just chat.... (Participant 4, female).*

*... I always knew if I did have a problem I could always go to somebody you know...there would always be someone I could speak to.... (Participant 10, female).*

#### *Availability of other adults*

Foster carers (cited by 4 individuals), social workers (3) and residential staff (2) were also perceived as available to talk to. For example:

*.....because I like someone just to be there for me, to talk about things. Yes. She [foster carer] was doing that. (Participant 8, female).*

*She [social worker] just...she...we just talk....things we don't like, we just talk about...anything we just don't like we just tell her. (Participant 12, female).*

### *Availability of friends*

Young people often turned to their friends. Seven mentioned talking to friends who had problems similar to their own, noting that this meant that they could talk more freely about their experiences and support each other.

*I can talk to this girl. Her name is S. And she's fostered too, so I can talk to her about anything. (Participant 7, female).*

*Because they had learning difficulties, or were disabled, they didn't judge me for being a foster child. I was just the same as them...someone with problems. (Participant 6, female).*

Many (8) talked about having lots of friends and it seemed that for them being surrounded by many friends supported their emotional well-being:

*The first day I made friends...lots of them...that made me feel more calm...because when I came to school I could see my friends and things like that. (Participant 8, female).*

### *Unavailability of social workers and parents*

Sometimes key social networks that should have been in place for young people were not perceived as available, negatively impacting on their emotional state. Although social workers were sometimes viewed as supportive, four young people commented that the social worker was not helpful and was not available to them:

*No she wasn't helpful. She was crap! She didn't do nothing...nothing at all. She was useless...absolutely useless. I told her at the end of Year 9...because all she wanted to do...she always used to come round, and we'd make her a cup of tea, and then once she'd had the tea, she would just go off again, and we'd think to ourselves, 'Well are you not going to help us?', and, 'I'm sorry. That's not my job to do this'. (Participant 10, female).*

Three commented on the lack of availability of parents to talk to either before or after they came into the care system:

*I don't have my parents here, and I don't really speak to them anymore...I spoke to them before obviously, but I don't speak to them anymore...(Participant 4, female).*

The examples above illustrate the absence of certain supportive networks that young people expected to be able to draw on. In the absence of these networks, however, young people had other sources of support.

#### **4.2.3 Engagement in Wider Social Networks.**

##### *Recreational activities*

In all, ten young people commented on having opportunities to play with friends and take part in other recreational activities, such as sport, music and crafts, as illustrated below. It appeared that this was of benefit to young people's emotional state.

*I loved music. In my country I played music.... I played piano for three years and I got my distinction in that. (Participant 14, male).*

*Sewing is more relaxing really. You produce something from it. (Participant 6, female).*

##### *Drama productions*

Five young people mentioned taking part in a school play and being involved in drama activities in school:

*I was in little drama groups all over the place and...I liked performing then...(Participant 13, male).*

##### *Religion*

Two young people talked about the protective influence of religion and attending church:

*...Because I know what's wrong because I'm a Christian...and...talking about religions, peace and conflict, crime and punishment...I enjoyed doing that. (Participant 8, female).*

*I used to go down to the church with them [friends] on a Sunday, me and my sister. It was quite good because I'd never heard anything about church before...I didn't know anything about religion or anything like that, so it was really nice to like learn stuff, and think like...well maybe there is somebody watching over us...(Participant 6, female).*

#### **4.2.4 Harmony/Discord**

Many young people talked about discordant relationships with others and the negative impact of this on their well-being. Statements here reflected the argumentative nature of the interactions. Young people also commented on 'getting on with others', with codes reflecting more harmonious patterns of relating to others more generally. These harmonious interactions differed from those in 'significant' relationships because the remarks tended to relate to groups of people such as peers or teachers, rather than specific individuals.

##### *Discordant relationships*

Eight young people mentioned the problems that they were having with their families prior to going into care. For example:

*It was quite stressful as well, because you had the clash between the two parents as they were going through the process of divorce. (Participant 10, female).*

*...then the second year we used to argue. A lot of things were happening....like... family problems. And that's why...I got into foster care. (Participant 14, male).*

Eight individuals also discussed getting into arguments with peers at school and in residential settings:

*...if someone wanted to argue with me, if I am having a row with them, if it's necessary to argue my case then I will argue...but when the girls started living here...they were all ganging up on me...(Participant 4, female).*

*....someone was being horrible to me...saying things, and the other one the same....someone else was picking on me....(Participant 9, female).*

Five young people commented on inharmonious relationships with teaching staff:

*And there was a few run ins with the teachers, where I walked out of school. I almost hit one of them, and hit the glass and cut my hand.... because I mean I wasn't a very angry person or anything like that at that point. It was just like...I just felt stressed out with work and other things, and just like the way teachers react towards not doing work, just thinks I'm just being rebellious and not doing work, when in fact my mind just wasn't on the work at all. (Participant 3, male).*

These individuals were able to consider their own culpability in these negative relationships with teachers, but it appeared that they were not able to effect change, given the other events impacting on them at that time.

#### *'Getting on with' others*

Young people also remarked on more positive interactions with certain groups. Nearly half (7) of the young people reflected that they had positive relationships with teachers, and five mentioned 'getting on with everyone'.

*I got on well with the teachers. I was always polite and everything. (Participant 13, male).*

*...but my friends were really nice at school....I got along with everyone. (Participant 4, female).*

### **4.3 Theme Two –Academic/Learning Support and Experiences**

Theme Two encompassed comments that related specifically to support and experiences impacting on academic progress, such as support with schoolwork, homework and GCSE coursework and revision. Such support was inevitably connected to young people's relationships, but it differed from the previous

theme's focus on relationships in and of themselves, in being concerned with support for education specifically. It also incorporated particular experiences that young people were exposed to within the academic arena and that may have determined the types of academic support they benefited from. Sub-themes and categories are shown in Box Two below.

**Box 2. Theme Two. Academic/learning support and experiences: sub-themes and categories**

- **Mainstream school systems and procedures**
  - General teaching practices/style.
  - GCSE support.
  - Careers or exam advice.
- **Targeted school support**
  - Exceptional/adaptive teaching skills and practices.
  - Referrals for additional support.
- **External learning support**
  - Growing up in a culture that values education.
  - Support/encouragement from family members, foster carers and social workers.
- **Academic choices and preferences**
  - Choosing GCSE options.
  - Choosing schools.
  - Study styles.
- **Past academic experiences**
  - Accessing tasks.
  - Reading skills.
  - Concentrating.

#### **4.3.1 Mainstream School Systems and Procedures**

This sub-theme reflected comments that young people made about general teaching practices and policies that applied to everyone in the classroom, as distinct from individual tailored support.



### *General teaching style*

Eight young people made reference to teachers that they were able to have fun with, but who still maintained discipline. They saw this as a valuable asset in the classroom and in their motivation to learn.

*Yes because she's like really....I don't know...she's not like the other teachers, like all they do is shout at you and say, 'You have to do this, you have to do that'. She jokes with you, but then like when it comes to work she is serious as well. (Participant 11, female).*

*He was just like great...he was really nice too ...but he's not like a person you would want to really annoy or anything....you was always like good in his lesson. (Participant 15, male).*

### *GCSE support*

Particularly with reference to GCSEs nine young people commented on the school policy and practice of revising in school as exams were approaching.

*Well we all did revision in classes. The last couple of months of classes before your GCSEs is all revision. (Participant 6, female).*

*Yes we had to sit down for revision... (Participant 2, male).*

Resources such as practice papers and revision books were made available and seven young people identified this:

*Test papers...loads of them he gave us to revise...(Participant 14, male).*

Four individuals mentioned reward systems in primary and secondary school and specifically at GCSE time.

*Everybody would get like a free cinema ticket...one of my friends...she got 16 [GCSEs], and...she got 16 passes [tickets]...(Participant 13, male).*

Other general school practices included support for choosing GCSE options in school (mentioned by 4 young people). For example:

*I needed 'learning support' to edit my work...and to revise for my exams and everything like that...so they gave me that one. (Participant 8, female).*

*...because they also look at you, and where you are good at and stuff so they put me in music anyway....(Participant 13, male).*

### *Careers Advice and Support*

Three talked about careers advice that was offered to everyone. This helped them to work toward specific academic goals:

*Everyone had to go and see a careers person, who said, 'Hey you can go here, you can go there, this is the....these are the results you need to get for this, this is what results you need to get that', and they gave me an idea of what I wanted to do...(Participant 13, male).*

Just three had used the work experience placement offered to all students in Year 10 as an opportunity to consider future career:

*I did my work experience in the nursery...and I found that I really enjoy it and I love kids...(Participant 8, female).*

### **4.3.2 Targeted Support in Schools**

This incorporated support and resources that were targeted and tailored to the needs of individuals and could be considered as 'additional' to the support that all young people received.

#### *Exceptional teaching practices*

Many young people commented on specific teaching practices that helped them individually and that appeared to indicate that teaching staff had acted beyond the minimum expectations of their general teaching role. Eleven young people cited a specific example of individual encouragement with their academic work. The examples illustrate that this was personal, targeted encouragement rather than general encouragement of a whole class group:

*....they gave me confidence, they said, 'You can do it'...They told me to, 'Get up there and just do your best'....so that's what I did.... (Participant 9, female).*

*When I was in Year 11, just after I went back to school, the teachers nominated me for an award. Which I got at [town hall]. (Participant 6, female).*

As well as encouragement, all fifteen young people described instances of teachers offering specific practical help:

*...because I didn't really know who to ask for books and that for revision...I would always ask him and he'd provide me with books....he wouldn't buy it for me, he'd just get it for me from the learning resource or whatever or from the library. (Participant 4, female).*

*He knew I hadn't done any of my coursework, so he like said to me, like, 'Do you want to stay after school and do it, or do you want me to give you all the work for all the coursework, and you can just do it in your time at home?' (Participant 6, female).*

Teaching staff helped young people to focus on revision for GCSEs, with three young people describing practical support with revision and revision techniques:

*I revised in school with my mentor and she taught me like things to revise...and techniques how to revise and I revised at home every day....like how to do... like do a spidergram and things...just important things that you will remember...not write the whole thing down.... (Participant 9, female).*

Some teachers took time to explain academic concepts that young people were struggling to understand and often gave up their own time to do this. Four individuals described this:

*They explained more things and they took their time to explain things. (Participant 9, female).*

*...because when I need help...after school I can stay...because she taught maths... and I could stay in with her....even when I had homework...and she helped me in some subjects...and I'd find it easy...she'd explain things to make me understand...(Participant 8, female).*

About half (7) described how certain teachers would push them to strive for better in their academic work. These teachers had high expectations of the young people, recognised their potential and would not accept anything less than their best efforts.

*But now they've got like a new teacher...well she's new...and I cannot sleep or do anything because she's always pushing me. (Participant 11, female).*

*And my English teacher said, 'Practice, go home, do coursework for homework...do practice essays, and bring them in to me, even if they are bad, I'll tell you where you are going wrong and you can improve them'....I remember once I gave into her three essays and one of them was a E, D, C and she said, 'Now redo them', and she told me where I went wrong, and the next day they were A, B, C. And I did them until I got them all As, As, As. (Participant 10, female).*

Two individuals felt that they were fortunate that teachers made special allowances just for them in response to their specific care status and circumstances:

*So every time I was in trouble at school he used to just back me completely....there was times I could have got kicked out of school. I was lucky he was there. Obviously he's the head teacher so he has to make the decision. (Participant 1, male).*

*I used to take advantage as well...like say I was tired yeah, I would ask, not just her, but any teacher, 'Can I have some breakfast?' and she would be like, 'Well you need to attend your lessons', and I would be like, 'No can I have my breakfast in my lesson?' and she would say to me, 'Oh go on then!' (Participant 4, female).*

### *Referrals for additional support*

Targeted support was also provided by general teaching staff making relevant onward referrals. Some (4) young people had a specific learning mentor allocated to them:

*...because I had a mentor when I was here from Year 7 and so she helped me through the whole school as well. (Participant 9, female).*

*And I had a learning mentor and things. (Participant 3, male).*

Many (11) young people had targeted learning support available in lessons or within the school learning support unit or centre:

*Well I did have this helper. She helped me and she was good. She helped me read and write. (Participant 7, female).*

*I would come out of science and have the one on one tutor with her...we'd just do our own private work...Like reading, writing, maths, everything like that. (Participant 1, male).*

Some (4) undertook life skills work where applicable and a few (3) had additional support from Connexions:

*Excel is just...you're in a group and you do things...like you plan a holiday away and you plan...it's like a residential...and it gives you more confidence and it's like life skills work. (Participant 9, female).*

*Like...to learn how to wash up...because when I'm older I'll be living on my own. So I need to learn how to wash up...and Hoover up...tidy up and stuff like that. (Participant 12, female).*

*This woman was in my PEP meeting and she was from Connexions...and she put me into the Chef Club. (Participant 7, female).*

#### **4.3.3 External Learning Support**

Young people remarked on academic support and advice from adults outside of the school environment.

##### *A culture that values education*

Several comments related to biological family members and foster carers promoting education and creating a culture in which education is valued.

*Because back home it's just a priority....you have to leave time for fun and time for education and what not. But it's just important, because that's just how I've been brought up. (Participant 4, female).*

*My Mum used to knuckle down with me and [my brother], because you know, she's always had that, because I think she's always been brought up in a culture, because she's from [country], she's always been brought up in a culture, that education, no matter what, always comes first...you have to have your education, that's like your priority. (Participant 10, female).*

### *Encouragement and support*

Many (8) young people were encouraged to do well by parents and other biological family members.

*...my Nan helped me...so she was motivating me...(Participant 9, female).*

*He [father] helped me do work... 'Just do as you can – do what you can do'.  
(Participant 12, female).*

Foster carers and residential care workers also offered encouragement, advice and support for young people with their academic work and with revision techniques, with eight mentioning this:

*Like when I got good grades and stuff, [my foster carers] would say, 'Well done, brilliant' and stuff like that....really encouraged me. And like...really praised me when I did something right. (Participant 6, female).*

*And she [foster carer] said, 'That's good' – she just encouraged me – 'OK then just do your best'...(Participant 8, female).*

Seven people mentioned support with homework, and one had specific help with organising revision:

*When I started secondary school they [foster carers] helped me with my homework. (Participant 5, female).*

*We [young person and foster carer]....during....towards the end we had a little timetable of what I'd revise for my GCSEs...(Participant 13, male).*

For five young people, social workers provided encouragement for educational progress or showed an interest in their educational life:

*She just motivated me to do well and to revise and to do what I want to do when I'm older....(Participant 9, female).*

Three remarked that social workers had asked them how they were getting on at school and appeared to be genuinely concerned about it:

*She just talks about what happens at college and what you're doing and that and how you're feeling. (Participant 5, female).*

Four said that social workers had attended meetings and made decisions about educational support and provision that they could provide for young people. Two girls mentioned that they were offered home tuition as an outcome of these meetings.

#### **4.3.4 Academic Choices and Preferences.**

This included individual preferences only in relation to academic work and environments. It did not reflect aspects of personality or individual coping styles that were intrinsic to young people, but rather the type of choices they would have made, or be expected to make, in relation to what, how and with whom they like to learn. This also linked closely with the support provided by schools.

##### *Choosing Options*

Five young people highlighted the difficulties of choosing GCSE options, commenting that they made their decision without support from others. For example:

*It was difficult. I found it so hard because I didn't....like I said I didn't really have anyone to help me decide, I had to decide it all myself. (Participant 4, female).*

*I wasn't really concentrating because of what was going on at home...but I don't know...I think if I had more time I would actually have chosen a bit better. (Participant 3, male).*

Four individuals later regretted the choices they had made and two were fortunate in being able to change to different subjects:

*First of all I chose business studies and I hated it. I couldn't stand it! So I changed it to sociology. And I chose food tech, and it was so....really bad, so I changed to resistant materials. (Participant 3, male).*

*Well it was...my alternative was business, so I had to do business, but music was my alternative...but then I changed....because I actually do want to do music. (Participant 15, male).*

### *Choosing Schools*

Seven young people remarked that they had made a decision, either independently or with some support from an adult, about the type of school they went to. They were able to reflect on the types of environment and locality that would best suit their needs. A number (4) were keen to go to schools close to home, so that they could be with their friends or people they knew.

*It was quite good because I had made friends on the estate and stuff, so I was going to school with my friends...which was quite nice. (Participant 6, female).*

*I could have gone to tons of other schools...and [foster carer] wanted me to go to another one, and I was like, 'No! My friends are going there'. (Participant 13, male).*

Three chose according to the specific learning environment of the school. For example:

*....Because it was like an Arts....Performing Arts college and stuff....I just liked art and music and the thought of it...I thought it would be really exciting...(Participant 15, male).*

### *Study styles*

Young people had other preferences for the ways in which they liked to work within school and at home. Some (3) found that peers were a distraction and had to sit away from them so that they could concentrate and not get drawn into negative behaviour:

*I just sat away from the people who used to distract me...some of them don't even like...they just go there for the fun of going there...make up noise, and distract other people. So I just sat away from them people that did. And everything went well. (Participant 1, male).*



Seven young people expressed a preference for a quiet setting where they could go to do work and where it was easier to concentrate. This setting was usually the learning support unit within the school.

*They'd just get the work for me and let me do it in the centre where it was quieter.....because I couldn't cope with being in the classroom and all the chattering...and the teacher going on....I wanted to just break out. (Participant 6, female).*

*Well it [learning support unit] helped me....it helped me...it was a bit more quiet...and I liked getting on with my work and stuff. (Participant 15, male).*

Having the option of a quiet place to go to do work appeared important for these young people.

Some (5) enjoyed working in a small group with few peers and adult support:

*I don't....like working in big groups because I just shut up and I won't talk to nothing...I won't say nothing. And in a smaller group I would say things or answer questions and things like that. (Participant 9, female).*

Three young people commented that being part of an academically successful peer group had encouraged them to work hard or had motivated them to do well:

*...at the end of Year 11 I was.... sitting with all the smart kids and they were getting... As and I was getting Cs. And then I thought, 'Oh I want to get As now'. So I started working a little bit harder. (Participant 13, male).*

Students tended to have a combination of coursework and exams as assessments at GCSE. Not all participants stated a preference for either type, but of those who did, three preferred coursework and three preferred exams. In general those who preferred coursework remarked that it was useful to be able to edit work and improve on it.

*It's like....you can do it in your own time, and there's things that you can improve...(Participant 15, male).*

Those who preferred exams liked the fact that they were over quickly.

*....because you didn't have to go home and do an exam! You....all you'd have to do is sit there and read a few points from the book, and then remember it, and write it down later...(Participant 13, male).*

With regard to revision although a small number of students (3) said that they did not revise at home, more than half (8 young people) said that they did:

*I revised at home every day. (Participant 9, female).*

*And...I kept going on GCSE Bitesize as well, in all my free time, to revise. At home and at school. (Participant 6, female).*

#### **4.3.5 Past Academic Experiences**

This sub-theme drew together all experiences of learning and education that young people recalled from their past. This was indicative of young people's own perceptions of their academic ability and had implications for the types of support they may have benefited from.

##### *Accessing tasks*

Eleven young people mentioned past experiences of their enjoyment of and success in learning tasks. Such enjoyment seemed to be linked to ability to access tasks, with individuals expressing most enjoyment for tasks they could access easily. Although this also linked to self-efficacy, it is relevant here in that it seemed to depend on the ways in which the teacher presented material to young people and made lessons fun.

*It was getting more and more better. I don't know. I just enjoyed Year 9. It was just fun and I enjoyed the lessons and just ...I don't know really. (Participant 9, female).*

*Because sometimes it's not all about learning and do it...you can play some games...games can help. Maths games...can help us to learn it. I found it....really fun. (Participant 8, female).*

Fourteen stated a preference for certain academic subjects. Subjects that were 'easy' for young people were preferred and those that were 'difficult' were

viewed less favourably. Again this was influenced by teacher input and young people's perceptions of their ability to do well:

*I enjoyed maths. Because I just liked it, and the teacher helped me....I hated art because art was really difficult for me because I don't like drawing... (Participant 9, female).*

*Ummm to do with English, I have liked writing stories when I've had to... and I'd be able to write, and....or being creative with words. (Participant 13, male).*

Nine young people remarked that they had good test results at an earlier point in their educational history. Past attainment levels could have been used by school staff to determine whether individuals were making expected progress and whether any adjustments were necessary:

*When it came to half way through the year, and we had the tests, and I was getting well above what I should be, and then they knew and it like, 'OK he can be moved up for the next year'. (Participant 3, male).*

*SATs were OK yeah. I think...I can't remember the marks that I got, but they were good. (Participant 13, male).*

### *Reading Skills*

Many (7) recalled their feelings when they had mastered the ability to read.

*'Wow! I can read!' I can read in class...(Participant 8, female).*

*...now I'm really good at reading and everything. And it has helped. (Participant 13, male).*

Those who found reading or other tasks difficult (5) were less likely to read out or try tasks in class for fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers. Their feelings about their own ability had a huge impact on their willingness and this too would have impacted on future learning behaviour and additional relevant support.

*I was too scared to read, in case people laughed at me, because I didn't say the right thing or whatever...(Participant 11, female).*

*I could be there like just looking at a word kind of thing and I'd be like, 'Nah I'm stuck. I don't know what that says. I don't always want to put up my hand cos otherwise it will make it obvious'.... you'd feel embarrassed. (Participant 1, male).*

### *Concentrating*

Six commented that their home circumstances affected their ability to concentrate and focus in class.

*...because of my family problems I started being bad...staying out late and everything like that...it made me off school...I never did school work...in them days...yeah I really gave up on school. (Participant 3, male).*

*I didn't bother doing anything in school anymore. I didn't do the work, I didn't listen to the teachers....(Participant 6, female).*

Many young people (7) who were able to focus appeared to believe that this was down to them making the decision to do so and acting accordingly.

*But....at that time...I was actually focussing on the work, and getting it done....and remembering what I had to do, instead of leaving it. (Participant 13, male).*

*...so I just started concentrated on my work....go home and work...(Participant 14, male).*

Although the latter comments would suggest that young people were able to help themselves to focus on work, it appeared that this was generally only accomplished once circumstances at home had stabilised somewhat.

## **4.4 Theme Three – Personal Characteristics**

Data analysis revealed a distinct theme that encapsulated values and characteristics that were intrinsic and specific to individuals, such as their personal goals and beliefs, shown overleaf (Box Three). The theme included those remarks that highlighted participants' own educational values. It incorporated young people's comments about their perceived responsibility or desire to look after themselves and be independent, as well as observations

about feeling empowered and capable of making important decisions about their lives. This theme was concerned with 'within-person' characteristics, comments where young people did not state that other people played a part.

**Box 3. Theme Three. Personal characteristics: sub-themes and categories**

- **Educational values and aspirations**
  - Sense of future.
  - Feeling GCSEs are important for future success.
  - Aiming high.
- **Coping strategies and behaviours**
  - Being independent.
  - Being with friends.
  - Acting out.
  - Being confident.
  - Being withdrawn.
  - Choosing whom to trust and rely on.
- **Self-Efficacy**
  - Choosing subjects according to past success.
  - Exam and coursework performance.
  - Choosing whether or not to accept help.
  - 'Doing your best'.
  - Challenging negative assumptions.

#### **4.4.1 Educational Values and Aspirations**

Most (11) young people had thought about their futures and had a sense of what they wanted to achieve. Their comments went beyond current and past academic preferences as outlined in sub-theme 4.2.5 and described their wished-for careers and long term educational plans.

##### *Sense of future*

*My plan is to go to college and be a chef. (Participant 7, female).*

*And I did have aspirations to go to college and further. (Participant 3, male).*

### *GCSEs as important for future success*

Most (10) felt that getting good results at GCSE would be an important influence on the types of job they could hope for in later life.

*Because it sets your life goal really. If you don't have good GCSEs and education how are you gonna succeed in life kind of thing?...There might be a job you want to go for and you're gonna need the GCSEs for it, and if you don't have the GCSEs, you're not gonna get the job. (Participant 1, male).*

*...in the workplace they need good employees and good GCSEs and grades...(Participant 14, male).*

To this end, they tended to worry about their results. Seven were concerned that they would not do as well as they hoped, and four felt that they could have done better:

*I was feeling nervous in case I failed everything and I was just feeling nervous. (Participant 5, female).*

*....overall it was OK. I could have done better...(Participant 3, male).*

### *Aiming high*

One-third (5) of young people had set very high standards for themselves and were aiming high. This was captured in the extract below, describing one girl's university application.

*Cambridge, UCL, LSE. Those are the top ones. And the bottom ones are Queen Mary's and Kent...Because I know that those universities, the grades that are required are really high, so I want to actually make myself work for something. (Participant 4, female).*

#### **4.4.2 Coping Strategies and Behaviour**

This indicated the specific actions and behaviours that young people displayed in an effort to cope with their difficult circumstances. These behaviours appeared to have been adaptive for individuals at the time.

### *Being independent*

Most (12) stated that they had to rely on themselves and be independent, and for a few (3) this also meant growing up quickly:

*But it just made me grow up a lot. Because I didn't really rely on anyone, I was always relying on myself...(Participant 4, female).*

*I felt as if I was completely by myself. No-one was there to help me. It was just me. But that made me....in turn, made me more independent and things.... (Participant 3, male).*

The two young people above also yearned to be financially independent and started part time jobs whilst they were still at school. As well as allowing them to earn money they said this offered a way of forgetting about the other problems they were facing in their lives, as shown below:

*And also I think the only thing that kept me sane was just working really. Just getting a little bit of money so I'd be able to keep where I am living if you know what I mean. (Participant 3, male).*

### *Being with friends*

Young people made deliberate friendship choices with five directly mentioning 'making the right friends':

*I just choose the right friends...(Participant 14, male).*

Being with friends and making choices about friendships linked to the sub-theme 'harmony/discord' in Theme One. Some young people emphasised getting on with others, and saw friendships as a means of coping.

### *Acting out*

Six young people used externalising behaviour, acting out or being aggressive to others, as a way of dealing with stressful circumstances:

*I just went crazy. I just went into my room and just smashed my room. I had a tantrum. I had big tantrums back then. (Participant 1, male).*

*...my anger started to build up, so I get....I got really violent when I was in school. I got quite aggressive....(Participant 11, female).*

This linked to the 'harmony/discord' strand outlined in Theme One. It appeared that there was a cycle here in that young people 'acted out', argued with others and then did not rely on others as a support to help them to cope. These episodes of externalising behaviour tended to be short lived though, and the same young people above also mentioned having friendships and getting on with others at a later stage. It depended on them breaking the negative cycle, which may only have been possible for them after they had vented their angry feelings.

### *Being confident*

Three young people remarked that they were very confident individuals and this showed in their presentation to others. The comments suggest that they adopted a confident persona in an effort to detract from the problems they were facing. Two enjoyed being in the limelight, possibly as a way of escaping their home circumstances:

*...well....me... I can be a bit attention seeking and very....once I'm in the spotlight, I'm quite impressive...(Participant 15, male).*

### *Being withdrawn*

Five described themselves as more withdrawn, observing that their stress manifested itself in quiet, timid behaviour, or a tendency to 'shut down':

*Because I had a low self esteem and I was really shy and quiet and everything. (Participant 13, male).*

*I became quieter and more withdrawn, and less able to like....try hard in things. (Participant 6, female).*



### *Choosing whom to trust*

Young people were able to make choices about the things that would be protective to them, such as deciding who to trust. Five stated that they chose what information to disclose about their personal circumstances and made sure that only certain people were privy to this:

*I didn't...I did talk to some friends...but... I didn't want them knowing things. If I wanted to tell them I'd tell them. But I just wanted to talk to my mentor because she understood me...(Participant 9, female).*

*Well at times...some of them did know and some of them didn't. Like the ones I was close to did know....I didn't want every teacher to know. (Participant 3, male).*

Two decided to have limited or no contact with their biological families, as they felt it was damaging to them:

*There was less stress and also my parents were at stalemate stage where I had no contact with them and I was happy with that. (Participant 3, male).*

*Cos I don't wanna go back...I don't wanna bring back memories and everything...cos it's still there a little bit...it's still there...nothing's really changed...so I don't want to..... so I talk to my mum now. I see my mum but at the same time my mum's still got that little...something that I needed to get away with...get away from. (Participant 1, male).*

#### **4.4.3 Self-Efficacy**

This sub-theme captured comments that related to a young person's perceptions that they could influence their futures and succeed. This appeared to be affected by their past experiences of success as outlined in the sub-theme 4.2.5. Those who believed that success could be attributed to their own efforts appeared to have a greater sense of self-efficacy than those who believed that their own success was as a result of the input of others.

### *Choosing according to past success*

Two-thirds of those interviewed (9) had reflected on their ability to succeed in certain subjects, and chose GCSE options that would give them the best chance of getting good results.

*I knew I could do good in those three subjects...I wasn't just picking them because I liked them...I picked them because....in Year 9 I had exams... And I did quite good and I had good comments about them...(Participant 13, male).*

### *Exam and coursework performance*

Six described the exams as easy, and attributed this to their own hard work at revision:

*So I don't think I'm going to do well in history because I didn't show myself because I found it so hard...and then when I came to the exam...because I really revised for it...so...I found it easy. (Participant 8, female).*

Four young people felt that they could make their coursework better if they applied some effort:

*Coursework...yes it was good because you could also improve on it, and you could only make it better...(Participant 15, male).*

### *Accepting help*

Whether or not a young person chose to accept help from others also seemed to be dependent on their perceptions of their ability to do well independently. Some (3) chose not to accept any help they were offered and others (5) felt empowered to ask for help if they needed it.

*....you can't always know how they understand things and...I'm like....I'm not afraid...I'll ask how to do something like...(Participant 15, male).*

### *'Doing your best'*

Many (8) participants remarked that they felt satisfied with the outcomes as long as they knew they had 'done their best'. This was linked to self-efficacy in that they seemed to believe they could do well or feel satisfied with themselves if they really worked to the best of their ability.

*But because of my abilities...I knew...I couldn't really aim for As and Bs, but for Year 11 I tried my best to aim for a B in maths at least and distinctions in music...that's like As. That was unbelievable because I never thought I'd ever get distinctions or Bs and Cs and that...(Participant 14, male).*

*And at the end of the day if I didn't revise at all I would blame myself...but the fact that I tried....I did try in my revision....I always try my best and then whatever I get that's what I get. (Participant 4, female).*

### *Challenging negative assumptions*

A small number (2) of individuals went beyond a desire to just do their best, to being determined to do well so that they could challenge other people's negative assumptions about them personally, or 'looked after children' more generally:

*Because I was just determined that I wasn't going to let people see what they believed foster children to be. Because they think, 'Oh foster children don't get GCSEs. Foster children fail at everything', and I was just like, 'I don't want people to think that because I'm a foster child, I'm going to fail'. (Participant 6, female).*

*I didn't want to see my parents that they won, and that they made me ruin my future. (Participant 3, male).*

## **4.5 Theme Four – Management of Change**

This was a small but distinct theme that depicted the effect of 'change' in home and school placement. The two strands shown in Box Four were not sub-themes but represented domains of young people's lives and have been used to simplify the description. This theme linked to a number of sub-themes in Theme One as illustrated in the thematic map at the outset of this chapter. Changes in

locality had implications for the maintenance of significant relationships and the availability of other social support networks. In Theme One the focus was on the feelings of young people when relationships were affected by them being taken into care. The particular theme here focused on the ways in which the change was managed and how decisions were made by others and received by young people.

**Box 4. Theme Four. Management of change: Sub-themes and categories**

- **Continuity at home**
  - Going in and out of care.
  - Involvement in placement decisions.
  - Managing contact with family members.
- **Continuity at school**
  - A new school as a 'fresh start'.
  - Multiple moves of school.
  - Moving schools with peers and siblings.

For many (7) young people physical change of home and school had been a feature of their lives before they were taken into care:

*Because I had to move houses a lot. With my dad as well. And my dad wasn't getting along with any of his girlfriends so...we had to move houses quite a lot. That's why I went to a lot of schools. (Participant 11, female).*

One young person had moved home countless times and attended six primary schools when she was living with her biological mother.

The effect of these changes was different from one individual to another and the input of young people themselves in making decisions appeared to be of paramount importance.

#### 4.5.1 Continuity at Home.

##### *Going in and out of care*

More than one-third (6 young people) commented on their experiences of going in and out of care, and how unsettling this was for them. They remarked that they moved between foster homes and their family home several times:

*....when I first got into care I didn't really like it, because when I got into care, I was always going in and out of care, because I went in care, went back home, went in care, went back home...(Participant 4, female).*

##### *Involvement in placement decisions*

The circumstances leading to the young person coming into care impacted on their feelings about the placement decision. A few articulated the reasons for their placement and felt included in the decision making process, or agreed it had been the right move for them. For example,

*So they put me for accommodation, to live for two days and I was like 'OK this place is quite good'...these people I lived with they were quite caring...so after two days they told me if I want to go home, and I was quite scared so I said, 'No', and they put me to foster care...(Participant 14, male).*

*I just....OK look, because I knew I was in care, and I knew no-one was going to hit me anymore. Like my dad wouldn't hit me anymore, and my step-mum wouldn't hit me anymore...(Participant 11, female).*

For one girl the decision was not easy as she felt responsible for looking after her siblings. She had repeatedly informed social workers that she was worried about her mother's ability to care for them and maintained that they should be placed in care as well as her. She went into foster care a number of times but ultimately always returned home to be with her siblings. The social worker in this case always discussed placement decisions with her and acted in accordance with her wishes. This provided a stark contrast to critical comments about social workers in sub-theme 4.1.2 and highlighted the value that the social worker role could have for young people.

*She always let me go and view the placement before I decided whether I wanted to live there or not...And she was like, 'OK you don't have to live here, what do you want to do? Do you want another placement or do you want to go home?'* (Participant 6, female).

A number (5) of other young people were placed in foster care with their siblings and on the whole they enjoyed having continuous contact with them. One girl, however, felt that it was better that her and her brother were separated, as they did not get on. This led to the breakdown of their joint placement, but this was felt to be the right decision for her.

*...me and my brother got split up when I was in Year 8...we were fighting too much...it was getting hard...because in a way we are totally different personalities...we clash...so things were getting bad, and he just had to go.* (Participant 10, female).

Two girls opted to live in a residential unit, as they did not feel comfortable in foster care:

*But what I found hard in foster care is that....the carers there, they would try to be your parents but really and truly they would have their children coming round....so it felt a bit awkward and I don't really feel at home, whereas here, I know everyone gets treated equally.* (Participant 4, female).

### *Contact with family*

Decisions about contact with family members was another area in which young people were involved:

*D [social worker] helped me get in touch with my uncles...I mean...it's alright...it's always, every single time I see my brother I'm really happy to see him...I'm always excited when I see him. And the same goes for dad.* (Participant 15, male)

*And I was just carrying on with life as normal but now I've decided to contact them and be a family...* (Participant 3, male).

Being able to respond to the needs of individual young people depended in part on continuity of social worker, so that rapport could be built. Some (4) young

people expressly said that their social workers could not help them because they were not in the role for very long.

#### **4.5.2 Continuity Within the School Environment.**

##### *A new school as a 'fresh start'*

Changes in placement also meant changes in school for some young people. Five went to a new school as a direct result of moving into foster care. Although it could be assumed that this would be unsettling for these young people, all of them commented that they were glad of the move, as it represented a fresh start:

*It felt nice. It felt nice yeah. A different environment completely. I mean...a different area. It felt much better. (Participant 1, male).*

*I was actually feeling happy cos there weren't....when I moved to here it wasn't loud like in London, and noisy. (Participant 5, female).*

##### *Multiple moves of school*

Others (3) had moved schools many times before coming into care and it appeared that these multiple moves were unsettling:

*I'm getting taught something and then I had to move schools, and then like...and then I'm getting taught a new thing. . So everything just like gets mixed up. (Participant 11, female).*

This may indicate that it is the *number* of moves that affects young people rather than moving per se. Having to move schools many times seemed to make young people's education feel disjointed, particularly as for five young people this meant a number of absences from school:

*I stopped going to school after when I went back home the first time. (Participant 6, female).*

### *Moving schools with peers and siblings*

Nine participants commented that they had adjusted to changing schools, including secondary transfer, as a result of moving on with their friends from primary school or the local neighbourhood, or by going to the same school as their siblings. It appeared that young people valued the opportunity of forging and maintaining relationships with those close to them and this influenced their ability to settle into a new school. This appeared to be of more significance than maintaining continuity in school placement.

*It was quite good because I had made friends on the estate and stuff, so I was going to school with my friends...which was quite nice. (Participant 6, female).*

*But the people that I made friends with in primary school, they moved, they came to the secondary school with me so I knew some of them there. (Participant 5, female).*

## **4.7 Summary**

The psychological construct of resilience was of relevance to young people in the present study, with several themes reflecting factors that have been shown to impact on resilience in a positive or adverse way. Young people's comments showed that they were not protected from all negative experiences, but were able to succeed in the face of such adversity due to a number of factors that provided a buffer against it. Their comments illustrated their own views of the perceived significance of relationships, support and personal qualities that had contributed to them participating at GCSE.



# Chapter Five – Discussion

## 5.1 Overview

This chapter considers the research findings in relation to the study's aims and objectives. It examines links between the themes presented in Chapter Four and existing research literature, limitations of the research and areas for future study. Conclusions and recommendations for the development of local authority policy and practices are presented in the final chapter.

The overarching aim of the study was to learn from looked after young people's experiences of education from starting school to taking GCSEs, using methods that valued their individual perspectives, whilst focusing in detail on educational experiences at the time of taking GCSE programmes of study. The interviews afforded insight into pathways through education for these young people with themes illustrating commonalities in their past and present thoughts and feelings, and the events and practices to which they were exposed. Young people's accounts highlighted protective and risk factors that they considered to have contributed to their experiences of participating in GCSE programmes of study and exams. This chapter examines these factors in relation to policy and practice in school systems, policy and practice in care systems, personal relationships and personal characteristics, respectively. It also examines links between these factors.

### *Limitations of the present study*

The research focussed on a small specific sample of looked after young people within one local authority. The themes that were drawn out of the interviews related to their own particular experiences. This focus was intentional, in aiming to explore 'reality' for the individuals concerned, in keeping with the ontological position of the research. In addition, within the constraints of the timeframe for the research, it was not possible to interview looked after young people who were eligible to take GCSEs but did not do so. It is not possible to postulate the types of experiences that they may have had, or to discuss the support that they may have benefited from.

The findings of the present study do not seek to be directly generalisable to other populations or to similar populations in other local authorities. That said, as will be discussed below, the research findings are consistent with other studies of looked after children, supporting their validity and suggesting that, taking into account the caveats noted above, there may be relevant messages from the research for policy and practice beyond the local authority where the work was carried out.

## **5.2 Young People's Views of Protective and Risk Factors**

### **5.2.1 School Systems Policy and Practice**

This section draws on information from all sub-themes of Theme Two (Academic/Learning support and experiences) and also considers information from Theme Three sub-theme, educational values and aspirations.

*Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) has made clear government's belief that mainstream educational provision has generally been the best option for all children including those 'looked after'. To this end, the guidance encouraged local authorities to place children in care in the best performing schools in their area. It is not clear that this policy had affected young people in the present study - most attended their local school, which was not necessarily high performing. However, all young people in this study, including those with statements of Special Educational Needs, were educated in mainstream schools, and highlighted particular school support systems that impacted on their aspirations and their experiences of participation in GCSE programmes of study.

#### *Mainstream support systems*

Young people described facets of their school experiences that were part of standard or universal teaching practices and policies. For example, opportunities for revision in class helped young people to feel prepared for their GCSE exams, as did the provision of materials such as test papers to help them

to practice. One school even had an incentive scheme according to which young people were rewarded for achieving grades higher than those predicted. An apparent advantage of this system was that it did not place value on getting high grades per se, but focused on young people improving on their own previous performance.

Previous research has shown that adolescents in the general population felt that their own views were the most influential factor in choosing subjects at GCSE and that they made these decisions independently on the whole (Darling et al., 1996). In the present study, however, young people mentioned that school staff had a role in supporting with GCSE option choices, and they commented that they had been explicitly directed to take certain subjects or options. For some young people this involved having an allocated time to attend the learning support unit to complete coursework and prepare for exams. This meant that they had a reduced timetable with fewer subjects to concentrate on - a practice supported in past research (e.g. Rowling and Willis, 2006).

For other young people, teaching staff identified subjects at which young people had previously done well and allocated option choices according to this. Rowling and Willis (2006) recommended that schools should use data of prior attainment to identify areas in which students may benefit from extra support. Several young people in the present study had chosen subjects that were 'easy' for them, and those that teachers helped them to understand. It seems that it would be useful for school staff to note the subjects in which young people are doing well and use this to inform option choices, as this appeared to enhance young people's enjoyment and the likelihood of them remaining focused on the programme of study. This practice, however, may not be perceived as useful for students allocated to courses that do not fit with their personal preferences. It is noteworthy that all those who mentioned that teachers had determined some option choices were in agreement with the choices that were made.

Such support and direction contrasted with the experiences of young people who were left to make their own decisions, and who found this very difficult, either because they had no help or because they were facing other difficulties with their families at that time. For young people who did not perceive support

as available, making the choice on their own felt like a burden, rather than being empowering. Perhaps it is not surprising that looked after young people, who are already facing many significant stressors in their everyday lives, appreciate adult support in choosing GCSE options. Such support from schools may be particularly valuable for individuals without the advantage of adult help outside of school. Schools could also allow some flexibility for young people to change their options if they feel that they have made the wrong decisions for themselves.

School policies that linked GCSEs to career plans appeared to be important. The policy requiring all students to attend a careers interview had helped three young people to set academic goals relating to their chosen career paths. Their comments suggested that the careers interview was an important focal point for their decision-making. It has also been common school practice to arrange work experience for young people during Years 10 and 11. Archer and Yamashita (2003) examined school practice in a London inner city school and found that work experience built aspirations of their sample of working class young people, inspiring confidence and helping to engender realistic views of the workplace. Young people in the study noted above also reported that they had received help and guidance from careers officers and teachers and this had guided their own aspirations. School support for decision-making about GCSEs – whether through teacher guidance, careers advice, or work opportunities – may be particularly important for those in care who do not have parents to influence and guide their futures.

### *Targeted support systems*

Young people in the present study discussed many academic support mechanisms that appeared to be tailored to their individual needs. The SEN Code of Practice has made it a statutory obligation for schools to identify those individuals who are not making expected progress and who would benefit from interventions that are;

*“...additional to or different from those provided as part of the school’s usual differentiated curriculum offer and strategies...”*

(DfES, 2001, p.52).

Many young people in the present study had learning support in mainstream lessons, in small groups or in short one-to-one sessions, and this targeted support with coursework and revision was seen to have helped them to access the curriculum. Some young people also had learning mentors who were able to work with them to ensure that they were able to learn and meet their full potential. Learning mentors were established in schools in deprived areas as part of the Excellence in Cities Initiative. It has been noted that;

*“Learning mentors are making a significant effect on the attendance, behaviour, self-esteem and progress of the pupils they support... the most successful and highly valued strand of the EiC programme...”*

(Ofsted, 2003, p.46).

The experience of young people who worked with learning mentors in the present study reinforces that conclusion. Learning mentors also often represented a key figure providing security for the young person.

In any sample it would be expected that there would be a diversity of opinion with regard to preferred learning styles, and looked after young people in the current study were no different in that respect. They were able to make decisions about learning environments that matched their preferences. Some liked to sit alone so that they could concentrate, others were able to focus in mainstream lessons, and others still preferred small group work. Many made use of the opportunity to learn in the quieter environment afforded in the learning support centre at school. Rowling and Willis (2006) recommended having a quiet space for revision for some students at GCSE, something that appeared to be particularly pertinent for the current group.

Young people reported that school staff had occasionally referred to Connexions for additional input. The Connexions service was established in 2001, and underwent changes to funding and delivery in April 2008. At the time of writing, the aim of Connexions was to provide advice and guidance for young people, as well as access to activities that promote personal development. Young people in the present study had received a range of support from Connexions advisers, including careers advice, specific support in setting individual targets, and, for one, developing her personal skills in cooking by attending a 'chef club'. For these individuals, Connexions was a key agency in ensuring they remained focused and committed at school.

Jackson and Martin (1998) found that learning to read early was a protective factor for their sample of looked after young people who had attained well at GCSE. For the group in this study too, learning to read was an important process, and reading confidence was an important influence on participation and engagement in lessons. However, teacher management of young people's literacy skills in school seemed to be more important than learning to read early for participants in the present study. According to National Curriculum expectations (QCA, 1999), young people should develop reading fluency in Key Stages One and Two. Some young people in this study learnt to read at a later age than these national expectations, and had benefited from additional literacy support at school – support that relied on school staff identifying the skills of young people and allocating appropriate academic resources. Young people also felt that teaching staff should manage classroom tasks sensitively and carefully, so that they would not be expected to read out loud, or ask for help in front of others if they were not comfortable. Such comments are understandable, and show that experiences of reading determined the support and resources needed in class, which was significant to the future confidence of young people and impacted on their motivation to apply themselves in learning tasks within the classroom.

Young people in the present study were a diverse group with regard to their academic preferences and experiences, and there was not one factor common to them all in terms of the academic choices they made. School support needs to reflect the heterogeneity of their personal preferences, to meet their specific

needs and wants on an individual level, so that young people learn that their opinions are valued (see also SCIE, 2004).

The White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005a) emphasised the importance of personalised learning to enable education to be tailored to the needs of individual children. Government allocated an additional £990 million to schools over the three years from 2005 to 2008 to enable schools to meet this requirement. The funding was to be used to fund a range of activities such as small-group tuition, one-to-one support and learning mentors. For the current looked after group such funding was evidently already being utilised in an effective way by schools, and young people were benefiting from the personalised learning that was afforded by this. The *Care Matters* agenda (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) may also have been impacting on schools' management of looked after young people.

### *Practices of teaching staff*

Alongside formal interventions, less formal additional support provided by teachers was also discussed. Most young people said a member of teaching staff had encouraged them to do well at school. Encouragement has been noted, in past research, as being a protective factor for young people who have taken GCSEs and gone on to university (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Teachers also helped to ensure that such young people had all of the resources that they needed, particularly at the time of GCSEs. They provided revision resources and books to enable young people to complete coursework and exams and also spent time outside school hours to work alongside young people. Such support seemed to depend on teachers' taking a personal interest in young peoples' needs and aspirations, implying that school systems that enable such pastoral support would be of benefit. As noted by Marland (2001), school management impacts on the relationship between staff leadership, curriculum planning and pastoral care. The mental health of young people has been linked to learning, and the promotion of mental health has been facilitated by an inclusive school ethos and culture, whole school organisation and individual classroom practice (Hornby & Atkinson 2003). School cultures that value each young person, regardless of ability, have been shown to be of paramount importance.

Furthermore, Grove (2004) outlined the benefits of school systems that valued and respected the contributions of individual staff members to the collective community of the school. Young people's comments in the present study indicated that many schools shared an ethos of inclusion in which school staff were committed to providing pastoral care beyond a focus solely on attainment.

Previous research has found that low expectations of looked after young people among teaching staff were linked to poorer attendance, and less success in lessons and exams (e.g. Jackson, 1987; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001; Chamberlain, 2008). Expectations of others have also been shown to be a vital influence on young people's aspirations (SCIE, 2004). In the current study nearly half of young people felt that teachers had high expectations of them in spite of their care status, and had pushed them to do well academically. The other half of this sample did not necessarily feel that teachers' expectations had been low, but they did not mention teachers' expectations as important during interview.

Although high academic expectations were seen as supportive for some young people, others felt they benefited from more relaxed expectations of their behaviour. At first this observation appears paradoxical, but there was a fine balance with regard to teachers' expectations, reflecting the need for teaching staff to bear in mind the impact of young people's particular circumstances on their emotional state. Several young people mentioned that at times it had been difficult for them to focus their attention on academic work at school. Teaching staff would need to be aware of young people's experiences in order to bear this in mind when supporting them to focus in class.

Six young people commented that they 'acted out', being aggressive towards others. The *Care Matters* White Paper (2006b) set out government's belief that exclusion from school as a result of challenging behaviour should always be a last resort for children in care. According to this agenda, school staff working with young people, as well as social workers and foster carers, have a duty to manage behaviour more effectively, reducing the need for school exclusions. For young people in this study, adults had been aware of the need to manage behaviour appropriately, and their expectations were sensitive to the particular



circumstances of individuals in this vulnerable group. Again, this sensitivity may also have been facilitated by a whole-school ethos of inclusion and a culture of valuing each individual young person.

### **5.2.2 Public Care Systems**

Public care policy and practice within the local authority also impacted on young people's school and home lives. This section draws on information presented in relation to Theme One sub-themes, significant relationships with adults peers and siblings and availability of supportive social networks; Theme Three sub-theme, external learning support and all aspects of Theme Four (Management of change).

The role of public care systems in facilitating stability and promoting well-being, and resilience through self-efficacy is shown to be enhanced by gradual and supported transitions (Stein, 2004; Jackson & Martin, 1998). For the group in the present study such stability affected maintenance of key relationships and academic support, impacting on opportunities to access learning tasks.

#### *Placement decisions*

In general, research has suggested that minimising disruption is paramount when planning care provision for children and young people. A National Voice (2007) and Barnardo's (2006) have both conducted research with looked after children who explicitly stated that multiple moves had impacted negatively on their education. The findings are in accord with those of the present study, in that participants who had experienced several changes of home and school expressed more negative views about change than those who had moved only a few times. Multiple moves impacted on attendance at school and young people in the present study felt this meant that they had irreversibly fallen behind in schoolwork. Chamberlain (2008) pointed out that absence from lessons had a consequence on a student's likelihood of taking the related exam, thus continuing the negative cycle. Regular attendance at school has been highlighted as a protective factor by many researchers working with looked after children (e.g. Martin & Jackson, 2002, Barnardo's, 2006, Jackson

& Martin, 1998). It appeared that stability, or lack of stability had a similar impact for young people in the study reported here.

Nevertheless, movement or change in itself was not necessarily seen as problematic. Many young people in the present study felt positive about changes of living arrangement and the relative safety and stability this provided in contrast to their home living environment. They also adapted to school moves when these were few, for example, feeling that they offered a 'fresh start'. The success of these moves, however, appeared to depend on young people's awareness of and involvement in the decision-making process. Dearden (2004) commented that in a sample of 13-19 year old looked after young people, *planned* moves appeared to be protective, concluding that young people need to be consulted about any changes that they may be subject to. In the present study, two young people felt that residential care was better suited to them than foster care and the success of their care placements undoubtedly relied on their views being heard and respected. Previous foster placements for these young people had ended in placement breakdowns, disruption that may have had a further adverse affect on them. For others, foster care placements provided the stability that they desired and met their needs.

### *Contact with family*

Government guidance (DCSF, 2008d) has noted that contact with biological family members is of paramount importance, and that young people's views about this contact must be heard. For many young people in the current study, continued contact with family members was positive and separation from them was very distressing. For young people who were accommodated with their siblings, this was viewed as a positive factor for most. These findings are consistent with other research (e.g. Holland, Faulkner and Perez-del-Aguila, 2005; SCIE, 2004; DCSF, 2008d). However, one young person felt that separate placements for herself and her sibling were of benefit. Others still chose not to have contact with any family members and felt that separation was for the best once they had adapted to the change. These differences highlight the need to respect and accommodate the views of individual young people wherever possible, with implications for the way in which the Corporate Parent

manages contact with families. Decisions about contact must account for the perceived significance of the relationship to the child: this cannot be determined if their views are not heard and acted upon by the state. A report from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (2004) similarly highlighted the need to manage and supervise contact, in order to avoid potential disruption to a young person's placement, and specifically advocated making use of young people's views about different family members.

### *The role of the social worker*

Research (e.g. SCIE, 2004; DCSF, 2008d) has shown that opportunities for stable and continuous relationships with adults and peers are important to young people. Social workers are in a key position to listen to young people and help to manage and facilitate contact with family members and friends following transitions. Life story work, social network maps and Family Group Conferences have been used by social workers as effective ways of listening to young people's views about contact and acting upon them (SCIE, 2004; DfES, 2007a & DCSF, 2008d). Several young people in the current study felt that they managed contact for themselves and maintained links with peers and adults following a placement move. It could be though that adult facilitation in relation to life story work and other methods outlined above would be useful for those who are not able to manage contact independently.

For many young people in the current study the link social worker had changed frequently, and this instability meant that some young people did not have confidence in their social worker. Young people who may already have faced much disruption had to form relationships with new social workers that did not remain in post for long. Some also felt that social workers were not sufficiently emotionally available – for example, commenting that social workers attended meetings in line with their professional duties but did not provide the support that they wanted. It may be that in these cases the support requested was not within the remit of the social workers concerned, but this appeared not to have been communicated to young people, who were left feeling that the social worker did not care about them or listen to what they had to say. The latter observation reinforces the importance of establishing rapport and

communicating with young people, which can be time consuming, but appears to be necessary if young people are to feel that they are valued individuals (e.g. McLeod, 2007). Government guidance has highlighted the need to promote continuous relationships between social workers and young people (DfES, 2007b). However, social workers have claimed that the lack of time to build relationships with young people on their caseload arose because of the excessive size of their caseload and the other demands on their time for each case (DfES, 2007b). High levels of turnover among social services staff has been linked to feelings of de-motivation, lack of authority and being overwhelmed by bureaucracy (DfES, 2007b). Whilst social workers were not interviewed in the present study, it seems plausible that their work is subject to similar pressures. The Government has set out plans to tackle these issues but as yet it is not clear how these will be implemented at a local level (DCSF, 2008d). The local authority targeted in the present study may need to consider tackling recruitment and retention of social workers to ensure continuity where possible.

In addition, many young people in the present study had changed to another social work team when they were 16 years of age. The transition needed to be managed carefully so that young people's lives were not disrupted at a time that was crucial for their education. Some also remarked that they felt that social workers were pushing them towards a reunion with their families or independent living, for which they felt they were not ready, following their GCSEs. Government is encouraging local authorities to pilot ways to enable young people to remain with their foster carers post 18 years (DCSF, 2008d). It appears that such a strategy could be extremely beneficial to this group of young people who wish to fulfill their academic aspirations without the additional stress of an impending move toward independence.

### *Involvement in education*

Many young people in the present study mentioned encouragement with schoolwork from adults such as biological family members and foster carers, outside of the school setting. They were also supported with schoolwork at home. Help with schoolwork may depend on foster carers feeling able to

provide the right support, and this has implications for their training and selection (see Harker et al., 2004). In Martin and Jackson's (2002) study, young people felt better supported if they had a well-educated foster carer who was interested in educational progress. Casey, Davies, Kalambouka, Nelson and Boyle (2006) found that parental educational level had an impact on the aspirations of young people. Several young people in the present study spoke of foster carers' interest in their educational success. Social workers were also sometimes said to have demonstrated an interest in educational progress, and contributed toward ensuring that individuals had the educational support they needed at home as well as in school.

### **5.2.3 Personal Relationships**

Not surprisingly, relationships emerged as an important aspect of young people's lives. This ranged from significant emotional relationships with carers and biological family members to wider relationships, for example with staff in schools or social workers, and relationships with peers. As noted earlier, relationships with others were affected by placement moves and school systems of support.

#### *Significant Relationships*

The most significant relationships for any individual are attachment relationships. Bowlby (e.g. 1982) defined an attachment relationship as an enduring relationship, the most important of which is seen to be the primary caregiving relationship of a mother to a child. In this relationship a child will seek proximity to the mother for comfort, and the loss or the threat of loss of this mother figure will evoke intense distress. The relationship provides a secure base from which an infant can explore the world around them, and in this way, secure attachment relationships are seen as the critical foundation for learning and development (Geddes & Hanco, 2006).

Previous research has indicated the importance of attachment relationships in learning behaviour (e.g. Balbernie, 2001; Geddes & Hanco, 2006 and Greig et al., 2008). Such relationships have been related to underlying executive functions of the brain, and have also been shown to impact on an individual's

working model of themselves and others, affecting self-esteem and motivation in learning environments. Howe (2005) commented that attachment relationships are linked to young people's ability to express and regulate their emotions, and this has a subsequent impact on mental health. Young people's comments in the present study highlighted the importance of key attachment relationships in their lives, and illuminated ways in which those important relationships had affected their well-being and helped them to learn. For example, they commented that significant adults were able to promote a sense of security and safety so that the young person could concentrate on schoolwork. Foster carers and school staff also took time to support young people with their work, providing encouragement and listening to them when they were feeling unsettled.

There is much research that has suggested that the opportunity to form later positive attachments can alleviate some of the negative effects of early adverse relationships (e.g. Howe 2005; Beek & Schofield 2004). Many young people in the present study were able to form attachments with foster carers and other adults in the absence of their biological parents. This finding is highly relevant to recent government guidance on the role of foster carers and residential workers (DCSF, 2008d), which recommends training and support to ensure that these adults actively engage in building warm positive relationships with young people, of the sort that other children have with their parents. In the present study, several young people said they benefited from nurturing emotional relationships with carers or significant others. Whilst the study did not explore causality, young people's comments about the importance of these relationships are consistent with the importance attached to them in government guidance. It is of note that the two young people who lived in residential care commented that they were supported by residential key workers but seemed to have formed more significant lasting relationships with school staff members. This raises questions about the relationships that young people are able to form with residential staff. It could reflect the need for training among residential key workers, or may be related to placement stability in residential care settings (see, e.g., Petrie, Boddy, Cameron, Wigfall & Simon 2006).

Teaching staff had provided security and warmth for some individuals. A number of young people also described the continuation of their relationship with a staff member after they had moved on to a new school – comments that speak of the commitment of the staff member in maintaining contact after this transition. In addition, young people clearly felt that certain teaching staff had a genuine interest in their individual well-being and progress, a sincerity that was valued by the young people themselves. Such relationships were evidently of significance to young people's emotional well-being. Whilst there cannot be a statutory obligation for teaching staff to continue contact beyond the bounds of their professional duty, the experience of these young people demonstrates the potential importance of encouraging and empowering such adults to maintain links with young people if they wish. This links to school practices of pastoral care and to public care systems in facilitating contact, as outlined earlier.

Relationships with peers and siblings were also seen as important. Several young people in this study commented that moving into a school with friends from the local neighbourhood, or moving to a secondary school with friends from primary school, helped them to adjust and settle quickly. Many young people had maintained friendships with a few close peers over an extended period of time and felt emotionally supported by them. It appeared that these friendships represented a constant thread in the otherwise disrupted narrative of the young people's lives. The comments of one young person on the loss of important friendships later in her life indicated that for someone whose life had already been characterised by separation and loss, the secondary loss of friendships was a distressing experience. Arguably, such further loss could cause young people to relive feelings associated with the initial separation from parents, related to what Lanyado (2003) referred to as 'multiple traumatic loss'. Lanyado commented that young people in care have often experienced several traumatic losses concurrently with no opportunity to recover between each, and this has enhanced their suffering. The impact of sequential losses, and the importance for young people of maintaining contact with others, is an issue that should be borne in mind when considering placement and school moves – as discussed earlier.

## *Social Networks*

In addition to significant attachment type relationships, a sense of belonging within supportive social networks has also been found to be important for young people's well-being and resilience (Gilligan, 2000; DfEE 2001). In line with that observation, young people interviewed for the present study commented on the perceived availability of appropriate people with whom they could talk. A foster carer, residential key worker, or a member of teaching staff at school often provided a source of support and advice. Friendships were also important sources of emotional support, and several young people mentioned turning to those who had similar experiences to themselves. Their comments suggested that the local authority could have a role in promoting and facilitating groups in which young people in care can meet and share their stories if they wish. Such provision has been recommended in recent government guidance (DCSF, 2008d).

Two girls mentioned attending church and an interest in religion; involvement that had provided an opportunity to extend their social networks. However, the value they attached to this religious involvement could also be interpreted in relation to attachment theory, as outlined earlier. Granqvist (2005) found that people with an insecure attachment history were more likely than comparisons to turn to God as a compensatory figure to help to regulate distress. It is beyond the scope of the present study to speculate on how religious belief might offer a compensatory attachment for the two young women interviewed, but their comments suggested that a belief in God helped them to feel safe and secure and able to cope with adversity.

The young people interviewed were engaged in a range of creative and sporting activities, and their comments suggested that such extra-curricular activities had helped them to foster a sense of success and to build social networks in the community. Activities such as cultural pursuits, the care of animals, sport and part-time work have previously been highlighted as enhancing resilience and well-being of looked after young people (e.g. Gilligan, 2000; Jackson & Martin, 1998). As part of the Government's vision for looked after children, set out in *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d), *Every Child Matters*



(DfES, 2004) and *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005b), local authorities have been encouraged to provide children in care with free access to the facilities they own such as leisure centres and sports grounds. Local authorities have also been required to implement integrated youth support arrangements since March 2008. It is likely that such targeted support was not yet in effect for young people in the present study, but their comments indicated the potential value of such arrangements in broadening their social networks and relationships.

### *Nature of relationships*

Many young people's lives before coming into care are likely to have been characterised by some level of discord (Nicholas et al., 2003). Most young people in the present study discussed the types of relationships they had with others, whether harmonious or otherwise. The absence of severe discord within family relationships has been noted as constituting a protective factor for positive mental health (DfEE, 2001; CAMHS Review, 2008). Researchers such as Newman and Blackburn (2002) have also highlighted the importance of parental harmony as a protective factor for child mental health. In the interviews conducted for this study many talked about parents being in conflict with one and other or with the young person themselves. This discord could well have had an adverse affect on their emotional well-being, and comments from some young people illustrated how stressful such familial conflict could be. Furthermore, for some, conflict with their birth family did not necessarily end after placement, and this has implications for the management of contact as illustrated in point 5.2 earlier.

Some young people also described conflict in relationships with peers and teaching staff. To some extent this is likely to be typical of all teenagers and the presence of discord in itself may not be hugely problematic. Rather, the level of discord and the young person's ability to deal with it may be more significant. Those young people who perceived themselves as getting on well with others appeared to feel more settled and calmer at school and at home. Indeed, Newman and Blackburn (2002) pointed out that, in order to develop resilience, young people should not be sheltered from all challenging situations, as these have provided opportunities to develop problem-solving abilities and emotional

coping skills. It is the management of discord with peers, teachers and others that is important. Although young people in this study did not mention support targeted specifically at conflict resolution, it appears that support of this nature would be beneficial. A question is also raised as to whether teachers were aware of the young person's personal circumstances, as this may have had an impact on their management of conflict. The last observation has implications for the sharing of information, to be discussed further in Chapter Six.

#### **5.2.4 Personal/Intrinsic Factors**

Personal factors that appeared to be inherent to young people are likely to have been affected by young people's past experiences and relationships with others. This section uses information from Theme One sub-themes, availability of supportive social networks, engagement in wider social networks and harmony/discord; Theme Two sub-themes, past academic experiences, external learning support and academic choices and preferences and Theme Three (Personal characteristics) as a whole.

##### *Education and future goals*

It seems plausible that young people who grow up in a culture that values education would be likely to hold such values themselves. This was found to be a protective factor in Jackson and Martin's (1998) study. It is interesting to note that many individuals in the present study also noted that their foster families had a culture of valuing education and this appeared to permeate the values of young people themselves and to form a part of their identity. At times this was in keeping with the culture of the biological family whereas for some it represented a new way of viewing education. It appeared that these values could be instilled at a later stage if the child moved to a foster family in which education was valued.

Many young people had a very clear sense of what they wanted to achieve and this seemed to provide a focus for them academically. In keeping with research by Denscombe (2000), young people in the present study also seemed to feel that GCSEs represented a 'fateful moment' in their life trajectories. They reported that their results would determine their future chances of establishing a

suitable career. Once young people had fixed a career goal they were motivated to achieve the grades necessary to ensure that they were able to meet it. Their aspirations may have been influenced by school practices such as careers interviews and work experience, as noted earlier. Young people's aspirations linked to the futures that they perceived for themselves. As well as having goals and orientations, young people also held the belief that they would be able to meet their goals.

A belief that goals are attainable has been linked to self-efficacy which, according to Gilligan (2000), is borne from experience, and is another source of resilience. Self-efficacy is reported to encompass a belief that one's own efforts can make a difference, a sense of optimism and persistence (SCIE, 2004). Many young people in the current study had used their previous experiences to help them to make present day decisions, for example, about GCSE options and learning preferences. The belief that they could do well had, they said, motivated them to revise for exams and improve on GCSE coursework. Such findings support research that suggests that it is important for young people to feel that their efforts can impact on their success (e.g. Gilligan, 2000).

A sense of belief in oneself, with a perceived ability to control events, was also reflected in young people's comments about accepting help. Some felt able to manage problems and workloads without additional help, showing a sense of self-efficacy. Others were able to ask for help if they needed it, and did not seem to blame themselves if they needed help. This relates to self-serving bias in attribution theory (e.g. Banks & Woolfson, 2008) in that, to some extent at least, these individuals attributed success to their own efforts (internal factors), and failure to the lack of input from others (external factors). For example, many young people commented that they had 'done their best' and this meant that they were quite philosophical and realistic about outcomes and recognised their own limitations without this impacting negatively on their self-esteem. Others commented that if they did not understand a concept, it meant it had not been explained sufficiently accessibly. The pattern of attribution noted above appeared to have been protective of self-esteem in this instance, suggesting that it should be promoted. Indeed, Masui and De Corte (2005) found that teaching students to reflect on their learning behaviour and to attribute

successes and failures constructively had a positive impact on academic outcomes for their sample of university students. Their study suggested that attribution style could be positively influenced by direct teaching of reflective meta-cognitive skills.

Some individuals who felt a sense of self-efficacy also mentioned that they were determined to do well so that they could challenge assumptions and negative expectations of others. Whilst perceived self-efficacy was beneficial for these young people, their comments also indicated a perception that adults, on a personal and public level, view looked after young people negatively, suggesting that recent government guidance has not yet impacted on stereotypes of looked after young people.

The SCIE (2004) report stated that self-efficacy could be fostered by adults who work with young people, if they encourage them to set their own goals and involve them in development of services. Newman and Blackburn (2002) remarked that exposure to manageable tasks and opportunities to succeed in valued tasks can cultivate a sense of self-efficacy in children and young people - highlighting the need for adults to manage the tasks that young people are exposed so that they are within the capabilities of the young person. Adults could also promote realistic views of what young people can achieve and highlight examples of success and instances where young people's hard work has paid off.

### *Coping strategies*

Self-esteem and self-efficacy, mentioned above, have been highlighted as sources of resilience (Gilligan, 2000). Young people also varied in the individual strategies they employed to help them to cope. These strategies affected resilience and could be adapted by the input of others.

Lewis and Frydenberg (2002) highlighted that emotion and coping are inextricably linked. They stated that a person's feelings influenced how they evaluated experiences they encountered, and in turn the outcome affected their emotional state, so that there was a continuous interplay between the two. They

found a positive relationship between use of problem-focused coping (e.g. seeking social support, focusing on solving the problem, physical recreation, seeking relaxing diversion, investing in close friends, seeking to belong, working hard and achieving, focusing on the positive) and ability to cope. Greater use of non-productive coping (e.g. keeping to self, worrying, ignoring the problem, wishful thinking, self-blame and tension reduction) predicted a greater inability to cope. These types of coping strategies have also been termed, 'active coping' and 'avoidance coping' by others (e.g. Leontopoulou, 2006). In the present study, students described a range of coping strategies that could be deemed as productive or non-productive.

Many made use of problem-focussed coping, such as being confident and outgoing, or enjoying being the centre of attention. Such strategies would have had an impact on the number of people available to the young person if they wanted to talk and share their feelings. Being the 'centre of attention' may also have offered a means of creating a diversion from the more negative aspects of young people's home lives. Many were also involved in leisure activities and pursuits that helped to distract their attention, which is also noted as a positive strategy above. Self-reliance was termed as an active coping strategy by Leontopoulou (2006) and this was mentioned by almost all of the young people in this sample. They quickly learned to rely on themselves to solve problems and, for a few, this self-reliance also extended to seeking financial independence. Having a job could also be seen as a diversion, again promoting this as a positive factor for looked after young people. Young people in the current study made deliberate choices when seeking social support. Some were able to trust adults and felt able to turn to them as a way of coping. Some did not trust certain individuals or groups, such as peers. They were able to cope with this by choosing who should be privy to information about their care status. This could have implications for the harmony of relationships with teachers as outlined earlier.

'Acting out' or externalising behaviour was mentioned by a number of young people, as was being withdrawn and 'shutting down'. Both of these strategies would be likely to have the effect of reducing the social support available to young people by increasing discord or presenting a barrier to positive

friendships and relationships with others and in this way they could be considered as non-productive coping strategies. It seemed though that they used these as ways of minimising their hurt or angry feelings in times of heightened stress. Once their lives were more stable they were able to make use of more productive strategies.

Studies have found that adolescents using more of the productive strategies also used more of the non-productive ones (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002; Frydenberg & Lewis, 2009 and Leontopoulou, 2006). In order to expand young people's coping resources, it is important to minimise the use of strategies such as worry, self-blame and tension reduction, and maximise use of strategies such as focus on solving the problem, seek relaxing diversions and seek physical recreation. The key appears to be equipping young people with a large repertoire of responses. Ways in which schools and other agencies can support young people in developing and utilising adaptive coping strategies will be considered in the following chapter.

### **5.3 Summing Up**

There is a complex interplay between all of the factors that impact on a young person's resilience, and ability and motivation to learn. The discussion above considers young people's thoughts and feelings about the experiences and practices that had led to them participating in GCSE programmes of study and exams.

Young people felt that adults had a key role in supporting them in all aspects of their personal and academic lives. They valued being able to talk to adults at school and at home, and they perceived benefits when adults were interested and engaged in their academic progress. In addition, their comments indicated that they felt that particular school practices - such as teaching practices, careers interviews, support with choosing options, and referrals to additional professionals such as Connexions key workers and Learning Mentors - were useful. Relationships with peers and siblings were also important for young people, and these relationships appeared to be linked to their well-being and

learning behaviour. Management of care placements impacted on continuity of relationships and educational engagement.

Young people felt supported in their learning when their specific preferences were accommodated. Their overall enjoyment and engagement in school life appeared to be enhanced by involvement in extra-curricular activities such as sports and drama. Many felt that their personal characteristics had helped them to stay focused in school. These personal characteristics included a sense of self-efficacy and particular coping strategies such as being outgoing, and relying on themselves.

In sum, there were many protective factors for the current group of young people in terms of their participation in GCSE exams and programmes of study, despite the negative experiences that they faced. Their comments are in accord with the findings of earlier research, including studies of looked after children and of young people in the general population. They highlight practices that had already benefited them, and also afforded an insight into additional practices that may be useful. Such practices will be considered in the following final chapter as a set of recommendations.

## Chapter Six - Recommendations

This chapter considers recommendations about the development of support for looked after young people, participating in GCSE programmes of study and exams, in keeping with the second aim of this study.

### 6.1 Recommendations for Policy and Practice Within the Borough

Recommendations for practice are highlighted in relation to the specific domains of Educational Psychology Services, foster carers/residential key workers and social workers. The distinction between each domain is made to aid clarity, although in practice, research and guidance, here and elsewhere, suggests that it would be beneficial for all involved to work together within a co-ordinated multi-agency team. A number of key recommendations across domains are shown as wider Children's Services recommendations below.

#### 6.1.1 Overarching Recommendations

##### *Recommendation one – listening to young people*

The *Care Matters* agenda (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) made it a duty of local authorities to ensure that every partner in the Children's Trust listens to children in care and acts on their comments. Local authorities may wish to establish a council of looked after children to meet regularly with Children's Services staff and share ideas, with an expectation that their views would be used to influence policy.

Involving young people in decision-making has been shown, in previous research and in the present study, to promote self-efficacy and resilience. Young people in the current study commented on the value of feeling that adults had a genuine interest in hearing their views and acting accordingly, rather than simply paying lip service to the policy rhetoric about the importance of listening. The ability of young people in the study to speak so articulately and openly about their experiences has illuminated the value of hearing their voices. Many of their comments supported findings of previous research, but



also highlighted the individuality of their experiences, illustrating that different young people benefited from different types of support. In order to determine what is really important to young people it would be necessary to actively listen to their views.

### *Recommendation two – developing relationships*

In the present study young people were able to talk most freely and openly to adults with whom they had formed trusting relationships. Results suggested that young people formed significant relationships with adults in many different domains, including foster carers, residential key workers, and teaching staff. These relationships were key in relation to enhancing resilience and well-being. Young people valued opportunities to develop trust and rapport with adults, and felt that relationships were supportive when such adults were available to talk to when needed. They also valued adults acting in accordance with their wishes.

The importance of developing meaningful relationships with key adults – as well as enabling continuity in existing relationships with friends and family – has been emphasized in the government's *Care Matters* agenda. For the young people in this study, it was clear that developing and maintaining positive relationships required time and sensitivity on the part of the adult. This is discussed within individual domains below.

### *Recommendation three – working together*

According to *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) adults and agencies working with young people have a duty to work together to co-ordinate support and plan appropriate interventions. Several young people in the current study commented explicitly on the importance of agencies working together at meetings held to discuss support they would benefit from. Policies at a strategic level should encourage and facilitate joint working between all professionals and voluntary agencies involved with looked after young people. This may be supported by organisation into actual or virtual multi-agency teams. Local authority policy should aim to raise the profile and ensure implementation of care plans and Personal Education Plans (PEPs) that should be in place for

each child to co-ordinate support. Only one young person in the current study mentioned a Personal Education Plan and the remainder showed no awareness of them when asked explicitly, similar to previous research reported by Harker et al. (2004). This demonstrates that PEPs may not be used efficiently or meaningfully within the borough at present. The local authority could make use of the 'Virtual Headteacher', who is responsible for driving up the performance of schools in relation to children in care, to co-ordinate the involvement of various agencies, by promoting the value and use of PEPs.

All schools should have appointed a designated teacher for looked after children in response to *The Children Act* (2004). At a school level the designated teacher should co-ordinate school based support and make relevant onward referrals to other professionals or groups such as Connexions, and the Educational Psychology Service. Joint working could help to ensure better support in schools to manage the behaviour of looked after young people and to meet their educational and emotional needs.

It would also be vital for social services staff, foster carers and residential key workers to work together with schools and other professionals to ensure consistency and continuity for young people.

### **6.1.2 Recommendations for Educational Psychology Services**

Educational Psychologists are in a unique position to support looked after young people with their participation at GCSE, as they work specifically to promote child development and learning. EPs should be a key contributor to the training and support needs of other stakeholders, using and applying psychological theory and knowledge – for example, theories of attachment, resilience, behaviour and systems thinking, which have been outlined as significant in past research and that presented here. For many individuals in the current study, adults appeared to have an understanding of the psychological impact of young people's experiences and this meant that they were able to support the young person in remaining at school and participating in GCSEs. For many young people, however, adults working with them may not adopt a

psychological perspective, and the school EP would be crucial in working with adults to develop this.

*Recommendation one – realising the specialist EP role.*

EPSs are increasingly establishing specialist EP posts, including a focus on particular vulnerable groups such as looked after children. Specialist EPs could contribute to whole-school training such as: promoting positive mental health and well-being; developing effective pastoral systems; developing small group interventions. They could work closely with those at a strategic level, such as the 'Virtual Headteacher', offering consultation to aid problem solving and development of strategy to support looked after young people with their education. In addition, they could be involved in the training and support of foster carers, residential key workers and designated teachers for looked after children.

*Recommendation two – psychological intervention with individuals and school systems*

All EPs working within schools and early years settings are in a key position to work at a systemic level, to help adults to manage the needs of looked after young people and to prevent exclusions. As well as using consultation with individual teachers and practitioners, it may also be necessary for EPs to carry out individual assessments with those young people in need of support with their emotional and behavioural development, and those with specific learning needs, recognising the heterogeneity of the sample. These assessments would ensure that young people have the support that they need to access academic tasks and participate in programmes of study, particularly at GCSE. EPs are also able to offer a distinct contribution to the formulation and utilisation of the Personal Education Plan, by working directly with young people to elicit their views, and by working with key adults to ensure that they are provided with a psychological perspective of young people's behaviour and learning.

As well as assisting schools in establishing group interventions, appropriately trained EPs could deliver individual therapeutic interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

### **6.1.3 Recommendations for Foster Carers/Residential Key Workers**

#### *Recommendation one – promoting wider relationships*

Foster carers and residential key workers are in a key position to devote time to developing relationships with looked after young people and listening to their views. In addition they could promote engagement in activities within the wider community such as sport, leisure, memberships of religious groups, and part-time employment, in an effort to extend the social network available to young people. Engagement in wider social networks could also be enhanced by adults teaching young people how to interact appropriately with others. This may involve teaching specific coping strategies such as conflict resolution and problem solving.

#### *Recommendation two – academic support*

According to information in the current study foster carers and residential key workers can enhance participation in GCSE programmes of study by communicating the value of education and creating a home culture that promotes and instils such aspirations and values in young people. They can do this by offering specific academic support such as advice regarding GCSE options and careers, help with homework and revision practices, provision of relevant resources, and encouragement and praise that highlights and builds upon young people's success.

### **6.1.4 Recommendations for Schools**

#### *Recommendation one – promoting an inclusive ethos*

The research here suggested that attending schools with a culture that values pastoral care would be beneficial to looked after young people. This pastoral focus would confer an expectation that school staff would work with each

individual to promote well-being as well as attainment, and would encourage the practice of teaching staff devoting time to developing positive and supportive relationships with young people. Allocation of Learning Mentors for individual students has been shown to be an effective pastoral measure. Staff would need to be aware of looked after young people's circumstances so that they could adapt their practice accordingly. This could pose something of a dilemma when the wishes of the young person mean that professionals working with them and trying to support them are not informed of their circumstances. It appears that teaching staff should be given basic necessary information but more detailed personal information should not be shared without the consent of individual young people. Teaching staff and other educational professionals would then have a duty not to disclose or discuss sensitive information in front of looked after young people's peers.

Teaching staff having high expectations of looked after young people with regard to academic progress, whilst also making provision and allowances for externalising or withdrawn behaviour at times of distress, has also been shown to be of benefit. School exclusions should be avoided where possible for this group, again indicating the value of professionals, such as EPs, supporting teaching staff in engaging young people and interacting with them in a positive way.

### *Recommendation two – academic support*

Many looked after young people in the study here appeared to benefit from school policies that enhanced access to GCSE programmes of study and also helped the development of other skills.

Schools should use data of individual's previous attainment to identify learning needs and implement appropriate learning support. Teaching staff should also handle specific learning needs, such as reading ability, with sensitivity, so that young people are able to improve their skills as a result of targeted intervention, and are not made to feel uncomfortable in front of their peers. Teaching staff have a responsibility to set tasks that are manageable for young people so that they can experience success. Highlighting examples of success in academic

tasks and other activities may also help engender a sense of self-efficacy in looked after young people. Individual learning preferences such as whole-class work, group work and individual work should also be accommodated where possible. Looked after young people may also benefit from opportunities to access a quiet learning environment whenever they feel it is necessary.

In addition to practices aimed at academic progress, schools can develop self-esteem and resilience of looked after young people in other ways. Specific coping skills such as conflict resolution and problem solving can be taught within schools. Staff should not shelter looked after young people from discord but should teach them to deal with discord in an acceptable way. Schools could also teach young people to reflect on their own performance and develop constructive realistic attributions of their successes and failures. Specific groups such as social skills groups and circle time could be used to support the development of such skills.

Particularly in relation to participation at GCSE, schools could offer looked after young people support with choosing GCSE options. At times this may involve young people having access to learning support in place of one GCSE programme of study. Revision policies that encourage class-based revision as examinations approach, and the availability of specific resources to support completion of coursework and revision are also highlighted as useful. Some young people benefited from school incentive schemes for attainment at GCSE. The focus here was on attainment at a level higher than predicted, rather than on high attainment per se. Careers advice and relevant and worthwhile work experience placements could also help looked after young people to set clear goals, raising aspirations and encouraging them to pursue chosen careers.

#### **6.1.5 Recommendations for Social Services**

##### *Recommendation one – developing wider social services strategy*

Social services policies should be adapted in line with recommendations in the *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) agenda. A national shortage of social workers has been highlighted (DfES, 2007) and recruitment

and retention has been raised as an issue that needs to be tackled. Social workers, usually the lead professional, should have manageable case loads that allow them time to build rapport and develop strong relationships with children. There should be clear pathways for the career progression of social workers and access to adequate supervision in an effort to promote retention of staff so that relationships with looked after young people can be maintained. It would be advantageous for young people if the local authority was able to develop ways to support young people in their foster placements post 18 years, in line with government guidance (DCSF, 2008c), as many felt that they were being pushed to move into independent living.

It would also be useful if the local authority was able to enhance the recruitment of foster carers through specially tailored recruitment campaigns. Looked after young people should have high quality care, preferably with well-educated foster carers and/or residential staff who can influence their aspirations. Foster carers and residential key workers may also welcome training to help them to support young people in their academic work. To this end the local authority could consider the use of multi-agency training to raise the profile of educational needs and the impact of education on the resilience and future life chances of looked after young people.

#### *Recommendation two – fostering effective social worker practice*

Individual social workers can make a real difference to young people's experiences of care systems. They need to build relationships with young people and communicate their role clearly so that young people's expectations are managed.

According to young people's comments social workers should manage transitions into care sensitively, taking account of their opinions and wishes about placement types. Planned change has been shown, in the current and other studies, to be a protective factor. Social workers must facilitate contact with family members, such as parents and siblings and contact with other adults and peers, in accordance with preferences of young people. This may involve using specific interventions such as life story work, social network mapping, and

organising Family Group Conferences. They may also have a role in facilitating engagement in wider social networks through supporting young people to access extra-curricular activities.

Social workers can impact on young people's experiences of education by endorsing a culture which values learning. They could also show an interest in academic progress and act on information shared at educational meetings to allocate relevant support, e.g. home tutor.

## **6.2 Summary and Future Directions**

It is clear that looked after young people in the local authority targeted in the present study have benefited from good practice at many levels within their home and school lives, despite the disadvantage that being looked after confers. The *Care Matters* agenda (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) seeks to formalise many of the supportive systems that may already exist to some extent in local authorities. The full impact of *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) has yet to be realized at a local level but it appears likely that it will serve to reinforce the employment of strategies and support currently being offered by 'good' schools, foster carers/residential key workers and social services staff within the target borough. It remains to be seen whether this formalisation of support will impact significantly on outcomes at GCSE so that looked after young people have the opportunity to grow and succeed in later life. The current research suggests that professionals can be confident and optimistic in this regard, as long as young people's views continue to be heard and acted upon and as long as this good practice is a basic expectation and not an ideal. By working together and putting the right support in place for looked after young people, professionals have made, and will continue to make, a positive difference. This involves working with each young person individually and respecting differences, as this group is not homogenous in their experiences and personal attributes. Future research could examine the extent to which *Care Matters* (DfES 2006b; 2007a and DCSF, 2008d) has been successful in meeting its aims at a local and a national level.



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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

Figures reporting achievements in GCSE and equivalent qualifications include results in all entry level, level 1 and level 2 qualifications which are approved by the qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) as appropriate for pupils pre-16. GCE and VCE AS levels are the only level 3 qualifications which have been included. The general range of qualifications, together with the qualification families into which they fall, are set out below:

General	General Vocational	Occupational	Vocationally related	Key Skills	Basic Skills	Vocational Languages	Graded Exams	Free Standing Maths	Other General
GCE AS	Applied GCE AS Double award	NVQ Level 2	VRQ Level 2 or BTEC First	Key Skills Level 2	Basic Skills Level 2	Intermediate GNVQ Language Unit	Graded Exam (Grade 8)	Level 3	Other General qualifications L2
GCSE (Full course)	Applied GCE AS/ VCE AS	NVQ Level 1	VRQ Level 1	Key Skills Level 1	Basic Skills Level 1	NVQ Language Unit at Level 2	Graded Exam (Grade 7)	Level 2	Other General qualifications L1
GCSE Short Course	Full GNVQ, Intermediate					Foundation GNVQ language Unit	Graded Exam (Grade 6)	Level 1	
Entry Level 3	Vocational GCSEs					NVQ Language Unit at Level 1	Graded Exam (Grade 5)		
Entry Level 2	GNVQ Part 1 Intermediate						Graded Exam (Grade 4)		
Entry Level 1	Full GNVQ, Foundation						Graded Exam (Grade 3)		
	GNVQ Part 1 Foundation						Graded Exam (Grade 2)		
							Graded Exam (Grade 1)		

Taken directly from DCSF, 2009.

## Appendix 2

### Interview Guide

The following interview guide functioned only as an outline of possible areas to cover in interviews that were led by the young person (following the introduction, below). The intent was that, insofar as possible, the interview should feel like a conversation, in which points raised by the young person were responded to with interest and curiosity. The interviewer would, however, steer the conversation in the right direction if the information provided was not relevant to the overall research question or if the young person came to the end of a thread of conversation and did not continue.

### Introduction

- General outline of interview process and aims;
  - For example: this research focuses on your views of school, and the kinds of things that helped or made things difficult, particularly at the time of GCSEs. There are no right or wrong answers and I am really interested in hearing your views about what is important. If you want to stop at any time during the interview, just let me know, and we will stop. Unless you say otherwise, I will record the interview so that I can really listen to you whilst you are talking. We will draw a timeline on paper from 'the start of school' until 'now' and we can use this to help to organise events if we need to. You can write on it, or I will if you prefer. Do you have any questions that you wanted to ask me about the research or the interview?
- Complete Consent form with the young person.

### Interview

#### Example questions to start

- What school did you first go to?
- What can you remember about school at that time?
- What did you think of school when you first started?
- Who were you living with at that time?
- What did you enjoy/not enjoy about school?

#### Main topics covered in the interview with sample questions

##### *Friendships*

- What can you tell me about your friends at that school?
- How do you think your friends helped you at school?
- Was there anything that your friends did that was not helpful?

### *Transitions*

- How did you feel when you moved to (name) school?
- How do you think the move impacted on your education at that time?

### *Adults*

- Who do you think helped you at school?
- How did parent/teacher/learning mentor etc help/not help?
- What kinds of things did [adult] do that was helpful?
- How did that help you?

### *Experiences of Education*

- What can you remember about e.g. learning to read?
- Was there anything that you needed help with at school?
- What were you best at?
- What subjects did you like best/least? Why?

### *GCSEs*

- In year 9 you had to choose options – how did that go?
- How was everything going around the time of GCSEs?
- How were things at exam time? What was helping/not helping?
- How did you feel about coursework?

### *Outside of School*

- What was happening outside of school?
- What were you doing outside of school?
- How do you think that impacted on your education?

### *Follow up questions*

- Can you tell me a bit more about that?
- How did you feel about that?
- What was going on at that time that was helpful/not helpful?
- What were you thinking at that time, about school and learning?
- How were things going at that time?
- Was there anything else that stands out as being important at that time?

### Summarising the interview

- Thank you for your time. You have provided lots of information that I am sure will be very useful. Is there anything that seems really important that we have missed out?
- How did you feel about the interview?
- Would you like a copy of the transcript?
- What shop voucher would you like?
- Where would you like me to send your shop voucher?

## Appendix 3

Dear

### Your View: Education and being in care.

My name is Alyson, and I work in Children's Services at [Name] Council and I'm also a student at The Institute of Education. I am carrying out a project so that I can learn from the experiences of young people in [local authority] who have been in public care, and hear your views about school and exams. I am interested in finding out the things that make it easier or more difficult to take part in GCSEs. I would like to talk to 14 young people who have been in care in [local authority], including both those who did GCSEs last year, and those who did not. I hope that it will help people in [local authority] to find out better ways to support young people in care with school. I have enclosed an information sheet that tells you a bit more about what the study involves. If you decide to take part you will receive a shop voucher to thank you for your time.

If you **would like** to take part, please indicate this using the slip enclosed, and return it in the envelope provided. You can also let me know the best way to contact you so that we can arrange to meet. Of course, you can change your mind if you decide later that you would not like to take part.

If you **would not like** to take part, please indicate this using the slip enclosed, and return it in the envelope provided, and I will not contact you again. If you change your mind, and decide that you would like to take part, you can contact me on the number or email address shown at the top of this letter.

With thanks and best wishes.

Alyson.

---

RE: Your View: Education and being in care.

Name:

I would like to take part (I understand that Alyson will contact me again, and I can change my mind if I decide that I would not like to take part).

☐

Please indicate your preferred method of contact, and details (phone, email address, letter address).

I would not like to take part (I understand that I can contact Alyson if I change my mind and decide that I would like to take part).

☐

(Please return this slip in the envelope provided).

## Appendix 4

### Participation of 'Looked After Children' at GCSE: Young People's Perspectives.

#### Information for young people.

#### **Please will you help me with my research?**

Here is some information that you might want to think about before you decide.

My name is Alyson Costa. I am a student at The Institute of Education and I also work for [local authority]. This leaflet tells you about my research. I hope it will be useful, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you have.

#### **Why is this research being done?**

I am doing this research so that I can learn from the experiences of young people in [local authority] who have been looked after, and hear their views about school and exams. I would like to find out the things that make it easier or more difficult to take part in GCSEs. As someone who has experience of the system, if you decide to take part, it will help me to learn more about this, as you can tell me the things that helped you, and the things that made it difficult for you. I hope that this research can be used to develop better ways of supporting young people in care in the future to take part in exams in school.

#### **Who will be in the project?**

I am asking 14 young people who have been looked after to take part. In [local authority] some looked after young people sit GCSEs and some do not. I would like to talk to young people from both groups so that I can be sure that I can find out as much as possible about young people's experiences of education from both points of view.

I will also ask you for your permission to talk to an adult who has played an important part in your life. This would be someone suggested by you – it may be a carer, a social worker, a teacher, or another adult who knows you well. If you suggest an adult I will ask them if they would like to take part, and they can choose whether or not they would like to do so. You may decide that you do not want me to talk to anyone else, and I will not.

#### **What will happen during the research?**

If you agree to take part, we will arrange a time and a place when we can meet. The interview will last about an hour. I will ask you some questions and I will ask if I can tape record our conversation, and make notes. This means that I can be sure that I am listening to you, and that I will not miss out on any of the important information you share, because I can listen to it again afterwards, and type it up. If you would rather me not tape the interview, I can just make notes instead. Nobody else will listen to the tapes, or see the notes that I have made.

I will use this information to find out more about how adults can help looked after young people to participate in school and GCSEs. I will write a report for professionals based on the information you give. I will not use your name, or any of your personal information, in any reports that I write. All information will be confidential.

**What questions will be asked?**

I would like to ask you questions to find out your views about school, and taking part in exams, and the things that help or make things difficult.

The exact questions that I ask will depend on what you tell me about as we talk.

**What will happen to you if you take part?**

If you agree to take part I will interview you on one occasion. You can decide where and when the interview takes place. You can also choose whether you would like to talk to me on your own, or with someone else that you invite along.

I am not looking for right or wrong answers. I am interested in hearing *your* point of view.

When we are talking, you can decide if you want to stop, or skip a question. You can do this at any time, for any reason, and you do not have to tell me why.

If you have any problems with the project, please tell me, or an adult that you trust. You can ask me any questions that you have at any time.

**Will doing the research help you?**

I hope you will enjoy helping me. The research will mainly collect ideas to help other looked after young people in future.

If you decide to take part, you will be offered a shop voucher to thank you for your time and effort.

**Who will know that you have been in the research?**

The only people who will know that you have decided to take part in the research will be you and me. Your Social Worker will have spoken to you to ask if it is OK for me to contact you. I will not tell them whether you decide to take part or not. You can choose whether you would like them, or anybody else to know, by telling them yourself. I will not talk to anyone else about your decision, or your answers unless I think that someone may be hurt. If so, I will talk to you first about the best thing to do.

I will keep tapes and notes in a safe and secure place. If I use your comments in my report I will not use your name, so that no-one will know that it was you who said it. When I have finished with the information I will destroy the tapes and the notes that I have made.

**Do you have to take part?**

No. You decide if you want to take part and even if you say 'yes', you can drop out at any time, or say that you don't want to answer some questions.

I will ask you to tell me that you are willing to take part by signing the consent form.

**Will you know about the research results?**

I can send you a copy of the interview when I have typed it up, if you would like one. If you would like me to, I will also send you a short report of the study by the end of June 2009.

**Contact Details**

**Email: [acosta@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:acosta@ioe.ac.uk)**

## Appendix 5

### Interview transcript for participant 4.

#### Introduction off tape

AC: So thinking back to the start of school, at primary, what school did you go to?

YP: I went to [names school]. That was when I used to live at home.

AC: OK. So at that time you were living with your parents?

YP: Yes.

AC: And when you first went to school, what did you think of it? What did you think of school?

YP: At that school....it was a mixed school, so there were boys and girls, and everyone was like different...different ethnic backgrounds. So it was fun. I don't know – I just remember that it was just really fun.

AC: What did you like about it?

YP: I used to like maths and English and science. But like...it wasn't really...I wasn't really....particular about the subjects, because obviously it wasn't really important...what you really got...because that's all like year 3 and year 4 and it wasn't really important. But I liked the playground when we used to play football. Yes so the playground was really fun. And the teachers were really nice, they made me feel comfortable and welcomed.

AC: Was there any teachers that really stand out as being particularly helpful?

YP: There was this one teacher that used to encourage me. I can't remember her name but I remember her face. She was Irish or something like that. She was like....like when I used to have trouble in the playground...as in...ok this has nothing to do with education... because I used to like playing football and the boys had a thing about the girls playing football with them, and when the girls wanted to play football with the boys, the boys would be like, 'No', so she kind of like encouraged me like not to get put off. And then because of her we then had separate days for girls football. We would have normal football from like Monday to Wednesday, and then boys football on Thursday and girls football on Friday so that everyone gets a chance. So that was important, the fact that she gave me a chance, it kind of encourages me you know. Like even now I still remember it because if you get a chance to do something then at least you know you've tried, rather than not doing it at all, and then regretting it. So yes.

AC: What do you think you liked about football and playing football?

YP: It was just like so cool! I don't like football now, I hate football now! I don't even like watching football! But I don't know....it was just like because the boys could do it, and I thought, 'Well if the boys can do it, why can't I do it?' And then because they didn't give me a chance to, I was more eager to try it, because I was thinking, 'What is the big deal about the whole football deal, and why don't they want me to do it?' I don't know – it was just fun. I had a swimming pool in my school as well, so I really liked the swimming pool. Yes.

AC: And so did the boys let you join in, in the end?

YP: They had no choice to because we had....sorry, Thursday was girls and boys, so it was either they let us do it, or they don't play at all, and the boys really enjoyed football, so I think they found out that I wasn't that bad so they kind of like...used to kick the ball to me, and I used to kick it back to them. So it was fun!

AC: So it sounds like that teacher was helpful....

YP: Yes she was.

AC: And what about your friends at that school? What can you remember about those?

YP: I had one Turkish friend. I can't remember her name now, but I know she was Turkish. She was really really nice. We used to be really close. But I don't talk to any of my primary school friends anymore. I had a friend that went to the school next to me....and like we're still best friends now, we still talk now. But my friends were really nice at school....I got along with everyone. And the boys. The other girls used to argue a lot, but I got along with them anyway. They just used to have those like little puppy arguments....not puppy love....just puppy arguments!

AC: And what sort of student were you? Did you find things hard or easy in school?

YP: Generally....even now yeah when I'm at school, if I find things hard, I don't tend to like....you know....if I need help I'll ask you for help. I tend to go home and look through it, and then try my best and then do it. I don't like sit at school and be like, 'Oh no I can't do this, I can't do that'. Like I never used to be....I wasn't good at art, and when I was at primary school everyone else used to be really good at art, and it was just like, I would just go home and try, and if I can't do it then I just can't do it. But I will try. I will go in and try it. And then.....

AC: So it sounds like that was quite positive.....it sounds like you quite enjoyed school, and that teacher stood out....was there anyone else that stood out as being quite helpful there, or someone that you really....liked or whatever?

YP: There was like a boy. His name was S. There was two boys, one boy called S and one called E. They were the ones yes, who wouldn't really let me play football the most, because I was a girl. And I remember them. [Loud music started playing upstairs] But yes...at the end....I remember them, I still



remember them, but I don't forget them, they were alright. I don't see them around anymore but I probably wouldn't even recognise them.

AC: And when did you stay in that school until?

YP: Until I was in year 6.

AC: And you were still living at home?

YP: Yes.

AC: Anything else?.....Oh yes, you know when you went to primary school, could you read before you went to school, or when you went to school, and how was that?

YP: No basically what it was was like, before I started primary school....I wasn't born in England, I was born in [country]. And I started primary school two years....I came to England two years before I started primary school basically. And back home they would kind of like teach us....like I came to England when I was like 7 or 6 or whatever. But back home the way they teach us was kind of different from the way they teach here. And there, they don't really push you, but I just believe that the kids there are a bit smarter. So when I came here, when I did start primary school, what they were teaching us, I used to kind of laugh at it. Not to be like sarcastic or silly or....but I just kind of found it easy. Because the things they taught year 6 in primary school, that's the kind of thing they would teach year 3 back at home or the year 4s, so I was just kind of like, 'Hmmm, is this the kind of work we're doing?'. So I didn't really take it seriously because I kind of knew everything anyway. I didn't think everyone else was stupid but I already knew what they were teaching us....I knew all the times tables and all that.

AC: Hmmm, you already knew them. So how many years did you go to school in Nigeria for?

YP: Hardly. Not that long. I can't remember how long, but obviously I think...I think when I started year 3 there, that's when I came over. When I was about to start year 3, that's when I came over.

AC: And so you started in year 3 at this school?

YP: Yes. So I think I only went to school there for....I don't think they have nursery there....I think I only went to nursery there, but I can't remember. I can't remember it. It's far back.

AC: So how was that – moving here and starting school? Did you start straight away, or did you live here for a while before you started?

YP: I lived here a year or two years before I went to school. Most kids when they come here, they find it weird....coming from [country], and starting school. But I don't know, I just kind of like mixed in with people. [unclear] No-one ever teased me about anything, there was nothing wrong with me anyway, but I was alright.

AC: And were you used to speaking English?

YP: Yes.

AC: Were you speaking English at school in [country]?

YP: Yes we didn't ever speak my language. We speak [language] but I don't speak it. I spoke English. So when I came here it was kind of like the same. Except I had different colour friends, but I didn't mind.

AC: So that was the only difference....and you could read and everything....

YP: I really liked reading, I really really liked reading. That was like my favourite.

AC: What sort of thing did you like to read?

YP: At primary school.....I liked story books. I really liked reading....I know....Jacqueline Wilson....that was my favourite author....I think I read all her books, I can't remember what they are called now, but I read all of her books. That was my favourite author. I think she came to my primary school as well to visit. I think it was during one of them like book weeks. She came to visit. I don't think I saw her, but she came to visit. So I really liked her, she was my favourite author then.

AC: And was there anything else that stands out about primary school....some work you really enjoyed or anything like that....

YP: I just remember football, and the swimming pool and those two boys and that teacher. But primary school was a really good experience. I know other people have had bad experiences, especially coming from a different country, but I never had such experience at primary school. I didn't have it easy, but I just....I think when I was younger, life was just much simpler. And I think that's why.... I really enjoyed it. It was just really fun. My parents didn't really push me, as in when it comes to like...because they knew I could do it, they didn't really like push me, push me, push me....whatever grades I get....like there was one time, when I think they were doing the levels, and I think the highest level was level 6 and level 5, and I got 4, 4, 4 as in 4 for English, 4 for maths, and that's like average. I think that's average yeah. And I had some friends who got lower, and some who got higher. And I had some family, like cousins and nephews who got higher and lower, so they didn't really...they weren't really pushy, because it was still....it wasn't really a major education...it wasn't a major part of education, so they didn't push me. So I kind of like had it easy. I just....primary school was just like fun for me, as far as I can remember. It was just fun. Because I knew that secondary school was important, and I got education from my primary school, it was just like a little play centre.

AC: Hmmm. So why did you think education was important?

YP: Oh. Because back home it's just a priority. Plus...I don't know...I don't see the point of you waking up and not like...I don't know, I just don't see the point of you waking up and just going to school, just going anywhere, and wasting your time. It's like I might as well stay in bed.....rather than just

messing...obviously you have to have...you have to leave time for fun and time for education and what not. But it's just important, because that's just how I've been brought up. I don't know....my parents...my family would never like say to me, 'You have to do this, you have to do that, you have to pass, you have to do that', No, but I just got this thing about education, I think it makes you dependent....no it makes you independent, it makes you rely on yourself, rather than relying on other people, and I tend to not like to rely on people, because I don't really trust people. So....education is kind of like a path that can hold you and make you....whoever you want to be. But I wasn't....I don't think I was thinking like this when I was in primary school, but that's how I think now. Yes. I have always had a thing about education anyway. I'm not really the type to like mess about. I always go and party a lot....not then, now, but even back then, I used to have fun a lot, even like, say some of the time, me and my friends we just used to have water fights during the summer time, and just run about in the parks and what not. Yes!

AC: So you had friends outside of school that you played with as well?

YP: Yes. I had my neighbour....like my best friend, she's my best friend now. She used to go to a primary school next to me, and after school she used to wait for me and we used to go home together....ride our bikes home together. And yes she lived right next to me, and we kind of grew up together, and we....after I'd...this is going a bit outside of primary school....but after I'd finished....because I went to two secondary schools, after I'd finished....after I left my first secondary school, and I moved houses, me and her lost contact for a year, but then afterwards we got back in contact again, which was really good. It's all good now. We're best friends now. And we're going to be 18. I turn 18 and....what am I talking about...I turn 18 on the [date] and she turns 18 on [day after].

AC: So you have your birthdays right next to each other too!

YP: Yeah. It's not like we fantasy....like 'Ah you two are still friends...'. We have arguments and that but we are still like good friends. I'm glad I have someone who we have shared our childhoods together...so it's cool.

AC: Oh that sounds good. And what school did you go to in secondary?

YP: I went to a school called [names schools]. It's a girls' school on [street] as well.

AC: It was a girls' school? And how was that? What were you thinking when you started there?

YP: I thought, 'Oh my god, girls' school!'. But everyone who lived in the area...the estate...no I didn't live on an estate, I lived in a house, everyone who kind of lived around that, went there. All the girls. And there was a boys' school like ten minutes away. So it was all the girls, and then you had some girls who were a bit...how can I...I'm trying to use the correct English.....who were a bit....touchy. Or you had some girls who were just....bad breeding anyway, and then you had girls like me, who were just....I don't know, I'm just whatever...I just take it as it comes. And so like, some of the girls were a bit more mature

than I was. I was never immature, but I was never really really mature. So I was....you had girls who were more mature than I was...who had like bigger breasts than I had, bigger bums than I had, and they just were grown up, and I used to think, 'Why are your bum and breasts so big?!', but it just showed they were more mature, and like obviously they were always into boys, and I was never into boys...so like...when I started my first secondary school, it was a bit scary, as in....I got along with people a lot...girls...but it was just that a lot of the things they were into, I just didn't like it. Because when you go to secondary school, everyone has to try smoking, everyone has to try, not drugs, nothing like drugs, but everyone at school tried smoking and drinking....and everyone used to go out and parties, like crazy....I joined in like the crazy hairstyles....we used to have like crazy hairstyles...we used to put lollipops in our hair and little ribbons and we had like them dummies, we would put around our neck, and then we used to suck the dummies, it was just so silly! And our socks, we used to like roll our socks, and we had ties, and instead of putting our ties on our necks we used to like...put them round our heads or put them round our necks....[laughs]. I kind of like got involved when it came to that, but when it came to like smoking and that, no. And then when it came to like partying and going out every weekend...we were still year 7 then and year 8 and they used to go out all the time, so I wasn't really into that either. And then I think when I....the first half of year 8....I left...my first secondary school, because my family moved houses, they moved....my family moved from [place] to [place]. No was it [place]? Do you know where...do you know [place]? They moved to there. So when I moved houses I was a bit sad, because I had my best friend and I thought, 'Oh my god how am I going to like...' but it's not like we came from heaven together so get over it! Because moving to another school, I moved to [school] when I left [school], and then moving to another school, it felt really really weird to me, because like...I was in the middle....I was at the start of year 8, and then everyone already knew each other at my new secondary school, because everyone started together in year 7, everyone knew each other, and there I was, the new girl. And I don't know...my first day, I wasn't shy, I just thought, 'What the hell!' you know, 'I'm not going to be shy forever'. So on my first day there was 3 other people who started with me as well, on the same, we were the same year, but not the same classes. And it was just like...I just talked to them, and got along with them, and when....they showed me around the school in the morning, and then at break time they just left me, and I was just there, and I had to find my own way, so I went into....this was my first day....I went into the dining room, and everyone stared at me, like 'Who is this new girl?', so then I was just sitting down at the table, and then a group of boys came over and sat next to me, and they started asking me questions, 'What's your name? What school do you come from? How old are you? Blah blah blah', and I just said, 'How old am I? How old do you think I am? I'm in the same year as you!' What's my name, and whatever. So I told them my name and what not, and they asked me what school I went to, and I told them [school] and they were like, 'Oh my god. You went to [school], that girls school, where there's like all these hoes [spelling?!]' And I was like, 'Shut up! That's stupid'. And I was like whatever...but they were just teasing me....they were trying to like see how much they could push me and how I would react. So it was funny yeah because I was just like, 'Shut up!', and everyone was like, 'Oh she's rude, she's rude!' and whatever, and then the girls came over, and the girls...I don't know....when girls meet another girl that the boys....not like, but the boys are a bit friendly with, they get a bit touchy and emotional about it. But there were a group of girls

who just got with me straight away because we had a lot in common. And there was a group of girls who at first they were like a bit, 'Hmmm I don't trust her', but afterwards they really got to like me, and I loved my secondary school. Oh my god!

AC: Was it [school]?

YP: Yes.

AC: We will come onto that in a minute because I want to talk more about that. But going back to [school]....you went there for year 7?

YP: Yes and the start of Year 8.

AC: And what did you enjoy doing there?

YP: Sports was good fun. We did trampolining. And we used to go on a lot of school trips...I remember. And we had the sports field so when it was summertime we used to play cricket...and relays and, you know, running....like outdoor sports games and that. And because it was a girls school there was a lot of bitchiness going on, 'She said this, she said that', and everyone just used to make up little mad things like, 'There is two girls kissing in the toilet', and [unclear], and whenever someone said two girls are kissing in the toilet everyone used to just leave the dining room and just run to see who is kissing, and when we got there it like was like, 'Oh there's no-one kissing in the toilet'. And on Fridays after school the boys from the other schools, there was a school... the boys from the other school they would come down, as in....because they're just like only boys and we're just only girls, so the boys would be into the girls, and all the girls, Friday....we used to finish early on Fridays, we used to finish at 2.30, or 2.00, something like that....and the boys used to finish their school around that time as well. So Fridays after school, the girls would run to the toilet, get their hair, you know, do their make up and that, and they would run outside the school gates, and the boys would be there waiting for them! And, it was so annoying! And it was just so silly...and all the boys used to talk to the girls, and like, I talked to some of the boys, but I wasn't really into that. On Fridays I'd rather just go home, because Friday's the end of the week, why do I want to stay at school, do you know what I mean, so I would normally just go home. There were times when I just tagged along and just stood and talked to the boys as well, but I wasn't really interested. So....

AC: Hmmm. Yes. And so you enjoyed Sports at that school. Was there anything else that you enjoyed?

YP: I still enjoyed reading, and I got along with the girls, but because we were all girls and there was a lot of black girls and our personalities kind of clashed as well, not just because we were black, but because we were mostly...because we were just girls in general, and when there is too many girls in one room it's just so much tension. And I kind of just got along with everyone anyway because I'm not really bothered. For me, I just see it as no matter what you do in life, people always look at you, people always talk, so just get on with it, stop complaining. So I just kind of like...I wasn't really bothered. There was a lot...there was girls that were like say year 11 at that time, when I was in year 7,

they used to like...they were really nice to me, they were really really nice to me, and they used to be like, 'Oh she's so cute!' so they kind of looked after me so that kind of helped me as well. So it was...I never really got bullied. I never got bullied. Say someone started trouble, I didn't go up to them and say 'this person wants to start trouble with me', but they were just always there so....it was quite good. I didn't ask them to look out for me, but they were just there so....

AC: They were just there for you anyway. That's good. And were there any teachers that you can remember? Any subjects that you really enjoyed?

YP: I think I liked Science but...I don't think.....there was a lot of fights, one girl pushed a pregnant teacher and we were all in the dining room and we all sitting at the dining table and we were all shouting, 'Fight! Fight', and it was so crazy. I don't remember any part of the education. I still liked Science then. But that's about it.

AC: That's all you can remember. And were you still living with your family when you moved to [school]?

YP: Yes for the first year anyway.

AC: And so when you first started there, you said a little bit about that...the boys were friendlier to start with and the girls were OK after a bit. And what about the learning aspect?

YP: It was really really good. The teachers are really really friendly....I think because of my personality I kind of got along with all the teachers, well all my topic teachers anyway. The teachers that taught me, I got along with anyway. I wasn't a teachers pet, but if I wanted to get special grades I kind of knew how to attach myself to the teacher. So it was really good. Everyone in my class was just fun. I always looked forward to going to school. And then when I went into year 9, that's when I went into care. No when I was just going into year 9, when I was nearly finishing year 8, that's when I went into care. And the teachers....I had a mentor...well she wasn't my mentor, she was just someone that I used to say hello and bye to, I didn't even know she was a mentor. And then when I was moved into care, because it was quite difficult...I wasn't left behind in my work or nothing, but I just found it difficult to concentrate a bit, and like I still got all my work done, but sometimes I would be in class and I would do my work but then I'd just be really tired afterwards. And I wasn't really joining in as I used to. Because normally I would just be really loud in the class and I would sing...we weren't supposed to sing...not just me....me and my friends would just do something [unclear]....but I wasn't doing that, and one teacher started to notice, and that's when I had been moved into care, so she was really helpful and she really looked after me.

AC: What did she teach you?

YP: She wasn't teaching me. Sorry she wasn't a teacher. She was a teaching assistant and she was also a mentor. And she used to look after me.

AC: And she just noticed that you needed a little bit of support....

YP: Yes. She spoke to me one time, and I'm not really the type that would speak to anyone about what is going on in my home or whatever, but I was just like...you know...[unclear] when I spoke to her and she was just really helpful. And yes she was just there for me. And I still speak to her. I spoke to her this morning actually. It's good to have someone like that...because you can't always speak to your friends about everything. You can't always trust friends, but I don't know...she kind of took position of...I can't really call her a mother, but someone like an advocate, someone who you can actually go to, and talk to....and she's kind of open minded, she's not like my mum. She wouldn't say to me, 'Don't do this. Do this.' Or she's not like my social worker, saying, 'If you do this, I'm going to do this'. She is just there. It was good to have her.

AC: It was nice to know you had that. So what sort of help would she give you? Was she just there....

YP: She helped in every single way. As in....when I first got into care I didn't really like it, because when I got into care, I was always going in and out of care, because I went in care, went back home, went in care, went back home, and she helped me through it, because I didn't really know where I wanted to be. Because I found it hard being in care. And my family had this thing about being in care – like if you're in care you become the government's child and whatever. So it was just difficult, but she was just always there to support me, and I kind of got away with murder as well....not murder...but I kind of got away with so much things...I used to take advantage as well...like say I was tired yeah, I would ask, not just her, but any teacher, 'Can I have some breakfast?' and she would be like, 'Well you need to attend your lessons', and I would be like, 'No can I have my breakfast in my lesson', and she would say to me, 'Oh go on then!' and everyone used to be like, 'Oh you're such a teacher's pet! How do you get away with it?' And then like, it wasn't just me that did it, when I started doing it, everyone started it so it was funny. But as long as we were in classes [unclear] and did our work they didn't really mind. But my school was just really good like that. Like even my RE lesson, that's something I really really liked....I really like my RE teacher. He would say to me, 'If you want to put your leg on the table, put your leg on the table, as long as you listen to me.' And that was really cool. He just used to always make us laugh, and we used watch DVDs and everything. Oh that school. I loved that school!

AC: That sounds really good. So you had the person, the mentor that you could talk to, and the RE teacher was good. Anyone else?

YP: Umm...it's not the head of year. What's that person who is below the head teacher?

AC: Deputy Head?

YP: That's it. I had him. He was so nice to me. Say if I was feeling upset, say I came in in the morning and I was feeling upset, I would just go to his office....all I had to do was just knock on his office door, and I would go in and I would sit down, and he'd be like, 'Do you want something to drink?', and I'd be like, 'Yes sir', and he'd give me something to drink and I'd just sit there and just chat, chat, chat, chat, chat. My phone would ring and I'd answer my phone. And he'd go to me, 'Are you ready to go back to lessons now?' and I'd say 'Yes sir' and

sometimes I'd leave my bag there, and say, 'Sir I'll come and get I after' or whatever, and that....because I didn't really know who to ask for books and that for revision and that, I would always ask him and he'd provide me with books....he wouldn't buy it for me, he'd just get it for me from the learning resource or whatever or from the library. So he was like....he was always there. And he was an RE teacher as well...as Deputy Head.

AC: Your RE teacher?

YP: No he used to be an RE teacher before he became deputy head and he was the child protection officer as well.

AC: So how did you know you could talk to him?

YP: Because when I went into care, obviously my school got involved, and he was the child protection officer so he kind of got involved as well, and I didn't speak to him because he was a man, and old...not old, old old, but he was kind of old yeah, [unclear], but I just kind of get comfortable with people easily, and it was just alright with him. I just used to talk to him, and whenever I had a problem, I would talk to him, and he just always helped me out. He just always helped me out. I loved it in my school. Everyone was really good and the students...I got along with everyone.

AC: So it sounds like it was a positive experience to go to that school?

YP: Yes. It was good.

AC: And so were you living with a foster family then?

YP: Yes. From year 8 until the end of year 9, I lived in different foster families. And then year 10 up to now, I have been living here.

AC: And what has worked best for you? Here or foster homes?

YP: This place is more independent, as in, if you're...obviously the staff are really really helpful and they've got really good resources and everything...and it's so peaceful in this house, it's unbelievable. If you want to study...there's always time to study....obviously the music is loud sometimes, but you just have to find the right time and the right place. But what I found hard in foster care is that....the carers there, they would try to be your parents but really and truly they would have their children coming round, and it's like, obviously you've got your kids yeah, but it feels weird....like sometimes at Christmas times the foster carers or whatever...parents, they would buy me a gift, and they would buy their children like 5 gifts. I know it's their child, and it sounds selfish because obviously if I had a child I would give my child 5 gifts, but I would give you all 5 gifts also [unclear], because I think everything should be equal, plus they're getting paid to look after me...so, do you know what I mean, so it felt a bit awkward and I don't really feel at home, whereas here, I know everyone gets treated equally, there is no....someone else's child here....their children is like in their house...here it felt better and I'm more independent, and I have my own key worker who I can talk to, although the staff they have got their kids outside, and so they will do their job in here and whatever is in here is in here, not like my child comes and says hi mum and bye, and she comes up to me and



whatever. So.....I like it better here. But the things I don't like about here...because I was living here...it's not so long...but I think I'm like the longest person here...it sounds long....different kids go and come, and I don't really get attached to anyone, but sometimes like....you're settled with someone, and it's just like they've gone, and I'm still here. But....yes. That's nothing to do with education either but...

AC: No, it's interesting! It's all part of the picture.

YP: Yes. That never affected my learning. There was a time when...there was some girls that was living here, and at first I got along with them. And I think they were about a year older than me, because at that time I was about 16, and they were 17 going onto 18 or whatever, and I got along with them, and because I wasn't really willing to do what they wanted to do....I'm not a goody goody girl trust me, because I sound like I'm really good! But because I wasn't willing to smoke or drink, or borrow them my clothes, or go to their boyfriend's house and have sex, they started to hate me. And like I have never experienced bullying, but I think they were bullying me because they treated me really really bad and I'm used to....I'm not really a fighting kind of person....I can argue when I need to argue but that's not really my type...that's not really...if I had a choice I would rather just leave it...as in, if someone wanted to argue with me, if I am having a row with them, if it's necessary to argue my case then I will argue, but if it's.....[unclear]. But when the girls started living here...I think it was 4 girls...they were all ganging up on me....that didn't affect my education anyhow. I just got on....

AC: What do you think it is that makes you like that – so that things don't affect your education? Because it would affect some people....

YP: Yeah definitely, definitely. Maybe because....I don't have my parents here, and I don't really speak to them anymore...I spoke to them before obviously, but I don't speak to them anymore and I kind of think to myself, at the end of the day....maybe people....for me it's just like I know I've got myself, and if I start....if I keep on going on about the past, I'm not really going to get very far, because there is things that happen that make you happy, and there is things that happen that make you sad, so at the end of the day, that's just life. Deal with it. Sometimes when I speak, it sounds really mature, but I think because...when you're in my position, when you're in care...it's better to mature....to mature quickly, because if you stay as a child then....you know I mean...if you stay as a child, then you're just going to always be there. I'm not trying to say grow up quickly, but you do have to grow up, because if you don't grow up, no-one is going to grow up for you. You haven't really got your parents to kind of say to you, you know, 'Have you done this? Have you done that?' Obviously they'll ask you here if you have done your homework and what not, but you know, they can only do their best, do you know what I mean? If you don't want to do it....you have to do it because you want to do it, because you know you want to get somewhere. I always think of the future, because obviously things that happened in the past...you can't change the past....you can't change your future, but you can make a difference. So.....

AC: That sounds really good. So it sounds like you have got strategies that you have developed for yourself – thinking about the future, and relying on yourself.

YP: Yes.

AC: That sounds helpful. Going back to [school], there were teachers that were quite helpful....and you said it was hard to concentrate sometimes....how were you getting on with your lessons in year 9, 10? How were things going?

YP: I always had my friends with me and I had [unclear].....they're still my friends. That was one of the ones that called me. They're still my friends. Well two of them anyway. So because I had my friends with me, once I was at school, I would have fun and what not. And then once I was back to my care home or whatever, it wasn't much fun so I would just get on with my work. So I used the time at school to have fun, which sounds a bit wrong, because you're meant to use your time at school to work....but I used the time at school to have fun, and then when I got home, then I worked. So because I had my friends with me...I didn't tell them what was going on, but they just always made me laugh, and always made me feel better.

AC: Do you think they knew what was going on?

YP: They knew I was moving....one of them, the one I just spoke to, knew, but they don't know why I moved into care was but she knew I was moving into care. But my friends aren't really the type of people that would butt into your business, they knew if I haven't told you, it's because I don't want you to know. So they never really asked me why, and if they did ask me why, I just like made up something. I'd be like, 'Because my parents have gone on holiday'. Because it's not their business, do you know what I mean. If you don't want them to know something, then you don't have to tell them.

AC: So they were helpful in that they took your mind off it....

YP: Yes.

AC: It sounds like they were good at judging the best way for you....some people like talking and some don't.....

YP: Yes.

AC: And what about your lessons? How were they going? I know you were focussed on having fun with your friends, but what about lessons?

YP: I focussed in year 10 and year 11, because I was here, I was much better. Lessons were....I just found my lessons fun. My Maths lesson was the funniest...we used to...we had a teacher we used to tease him...[unclear] it was just funny. And we had a new teacher...I was always like a favourite student to my teachers, I don't know why...not that I wanted to be a teacher's pet, but I just got along with my teachers and they liked me so....But my maths lessons to start off with....I never liked maths, well I liked maths when I was younger, but when I got to secondary school I never really liked maths anymore...and, when it came to maths I was in the middle....I wasn't on top and I wasn't at the bottom, I was in the middle. And I had all my favourite friends in my class, so it wasn't really like a lesson to me....even though we were learning, it wasn't like a

lesson to me....it was just a place to meet up with my friends, and discuss with them what we did on the weekend or whatever, so maths was fun. When it was time to get on with my work, I would get on with my work yeah but, if I wasn't told to get on with it, I wouldn't do it. Because I knew that I wasn't really good at it and all I can do is my best, so there's no need to push myself, there's no need to think...OK if I know I'm going to get a C, I'm not going to push myself to get an A, because I know there is no way I'm going to get an A...so...I just did my best. And I took English and I thought I was too smart for my own good with English, and I don't revise, I don't study, and I took higher paper at Year 11 and I got an A and a D! So I'm doing it again at A Level, at AS....

AC: So that's really good – you had an A.

YP: I got an A for literature and a D for language. So....that's [unclear]...maybe if I had done revision I wouldn't have done so bad.

AC: Can you revise for a language exam?!

YP: Exactly! That's the reason I didn't revise. So maybe I just wasn't good at it...so I'm not bothered anyway. But I had to do it again at AS, I had to do GCSE again at AS, just because you need GCSE English for uni.

AC: So how did you get on with that?

YP: I don't know yet. I find out next week.

AC: Oh yes. GCSE results are out next week aren't they. So did you have to choose options at the end of year 9? How was that?

YP: Yes. It was difficult. I found it so hard because I didn't....like I said I didn't really have anyone to help me decide, I had to decide it all myself. So it was like...I didn't really know what I wanted to do yet, I don't know what I want to be. So I just thought...basically I ended up choosing Drama and ICT. I did BTEC Drama, ICT, History. Yes, because you have four options basically, but BTEC I got 4 GCSEs out of it, so that took up two of my options. So ICT and History. I chose History because I used to enjoy History, and I thought I was good at it, but then in GCSE I got a D, because I slept throughout the exam! It was so boring! ICT I got an A in the end, and I enjoyed ICT because my teacher was really fun. She used to make me laugh, and I got to eat in her class! BTEC Drama was just funny...my drama teacher used to shout, and whenever she used to shout, she just made me laugh.

AC: Why?!

YP: I don't know, she just looked like she was crazy! So I used to laugh at her. In my drama class, none of my close friends were in my drama class, so that gave me a chance to meet other people, and get to know other people. So drama was fun. And I got four Bs out of it and I can't even act! Because it was a BTEC we didn't just do acting, we did production, and we did marketing, and all sorts of business in drama, it was kind of business and drama, so....

AC: So how did you choose?

YP: I don't know. I just came to a conclusion really and truly. Because I said yeah....I didn't know what I wanted to be then, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Like now I want to do law and philosophy or law and something else. But then...I think I wanted to become a....what did I want to be?....I don't know...I wanted to become something, and I thought if I choose Drama and ICT and History, that would be a good path or whatever...

AC: So were you with your foster family then?

YP: Yes.

AC: Were they helpful?

YP: Not much, because I didn't speak to them much about it. But even if I had spoken to them much about it, I think it would still be down to me because at the end of the day there's less they could do to help, because they could say to me, 'Well what do you want to be?' and I could say, 'I want to be a doctor', and they would be like, 'Well choose Science, choose this, choose that', and that's all they can do...obviously that's being helpful, but at the end of the day, it's still down to me, so I didn't really speak to them about it, like I said yeah, I just always tend...to like do things....I just sit there and just do it and if it goes right, then it goes right, but if it doesn't go right, then at least I know I tried. Also like, towards year 11, no year 10, I got my first job. No year 9 I got my first job. Sorry not year 9, year 10 I got my first job, towards year 10. I didn't find it difficult after that and it kind of got me going as well because I felt like 'Yes! I've got ' [unclear]. I got my first job...I got it at [shop]. I was doing like makeover and that and it was like some [unclear] or whatever but it was fun. The money wasn't great, it wasn't good but I wasn't even allowed to go to at work anyway, because you're meant to work when you are 16 or over, but I was approaching? [unclear] 16 when I got my first job, but they allowed me because they said I was good at it.

AC: How do you think that helped you? That's quite a...not many young people do that do they?

YP: It just made me grow up, because I saw...I don't know....it made me grow up, because I was working, and I was at school...not...no-one was doing it actually when I was at school, no-one was doing it...and after school...I would finish school at...I didn't work during school actually...I think I only did it one time...one time I worked after school but I couldn't do it, it was not fun, because I wanted to have time with my friends as well, but weekends, like on Fridays my friends would be talking like, 'What are we going to do on Saturday?' and I would be thinking, 'I've got work on Saturdays'. But I always gave up work anyway if I knew I wanted to go out with my friends. But it just made me grow up a lot. Because I didn't really rely on anyone, I was always relying on myself, so even like when I was in care.... when I was living with my foster carer, she didn't [unclear], so I was like, 'OK whatever'. No I didn't say 'whatever'. I just thought 'Alright then. I'll just go to work isn't it and get my own money'. But I was never rude about it [unclear], and I would never boast about it. I don't think anybody knew I had a job at school actually. It was only towards year 11 that people knew I had a job, because everyone wanted to get a job, and I kind of told them, 'Well if you do this and if you do that', and that was when everyone

knew. But when I was there, no-one knew, I just kind of did it for myself, and it was to help me anyway. I wanted to start saving, because I knew that....I'm going to be in care, not all my life, but I'm going to be in care for a long time, and then eventually I'll move by myself and go to uni. I don't know. I had to grow up fast anyway. I grew up fast.

AC: That's amazing. Do you ever think how well you have done?

YP: I think I have done well, but it's not really a big deal. OK, I'm not like racing to be like on the same level as other people, but I think there is a level where I want to get for me to say, 'OK yes, I've achiev....I've succeeded'. I [unclear] but I've got this thing about it where I know, if I reach this place, if I reach my goal, I can think, yes I've got this. But during the whole...obviously after I worked in [shop], I've had other jobs. And some of them have gone well, and some of them have gone bad...when I was working at [shop], when I was still at school, some of them were like older people and they weren't really comfortable about it. They were like, 'She's not even the same age as my grandchild, my granddaughter, and she's working here and she's getting paid more than us'. The pay wasn't good. I can actually tell you what the pay....I think was like less than like....it was like £5 something....that's not good...for what I used to do....I used to touch people's faces, and rub people's faces, it was disgusting. But I used to get commission as well, like the more you sell the more commission you got, so that was what got me the money. But even like when I got the money, I didn't use it for nothing. I never used to like spend like....when I was at school, during lunchtimes at school, I wouldn't say that because I got money I would eat Chinese every day, or I would eat McDonalds every day.....I still ate the same as everyone else. Like if everyone had 50p I would still have 50p as well. I didn't be like, 'Well I've got a £10 note, so I'm going to buy....' I was just basically....simple. So my friends still had to borrow me money, I still had to borrow them money back so....

AC: And what were you doing with your money? Saving it?

YP: I saved it. I saved a lot of it. I didn't get paid much anyway, and I didn't work for much hours, so what I did have, I saved it, and I bought everything I wanted...so if I saw like a nice gold necklace, I'd just buy it, and I got people gifts with it. And then from that time up til now I've been working and I've been in education.

AC: And how was it, doing both of those things at the same time?

YP: Wasn't bad. GCSE time – I took two weeks off. I was just like, I just need two weeks to like...read. And when I say read, I don't even read....I don't know how to revise you know! I don't know how to revise. Like if I sit here and say I'm going to take a book, I cannot do it....I'm so....I just get impatient....as in I can't sit and read. It's just so boring....I don't know how anyone can do it. I just tap on my phone, I put the TV on, I just fall asleep. That's what I do. I always fall asleep when I revise. So I didn't work for two weeks, and I just had fun! I did no revision. And I think like three days to my exams I started revising....for Science. And I'd sit in the library. And even though I was in the library I was just doing it because everyone else was doing it.... I couldn't revise! I don't know

how to revise! I just always cram things in my head. That's what I do. I cram things in my head, and then after the exam I forget them all!

AC: And how do you get it into your head?

YP: I just go through it, and go through and go through it. Like say I had....during my GCSEs say I had Science and English....say I had Science in the morning and English in the afternoon....I would stay up all night and all morning revising for Science, and then go and do the Science exam and just get it out of my head and just get it on the paper.....and then if you asked me one of the questions tomorrow, I would not know...unless it's really simple. I would just totally forget. And then because we had like an hour break before we had the next whatever, I would go through everything I've already been through in the English textbook, and then go the English exam, revise it all, and then forget it! I would come out of the exam hall, and I'd be smiling, because I did my best yeah...I'm not going to kill myself! Like every time I had an exam I would just....I think it was really silly of me...I would come out smiling and my friends would be like, 'What's wrong with you? Do you know [unclear]. And I would be like, 'I don't care!' And at the end of the day if I didn't revise at all I would blame myself, because I would be like, 'OK well I didn't revise and therefore, why would I complain if I've failed it', but the fact that I tried....I did actually make an effort to try...I did try in my revision....I always try my best and then whatever I get that's what I get. Like when I got a D in history for my GCSE...I didn't blame myself....I didn't try but I didn't blame myself, because I knew I couldn't do it, so I didn't bother trying, and therefore I couldn't blame myself. But most....all my other exams, I was happy with my results because I know I tried....although I would have preferred to get all A, A, A, I still got A, A and B, B, and I think one C. and then I still thought, 'Whatever isn't it?'. Some people got better than me and I was just like, 'Whatever isn't it?' I'm not one to be like because I've got a C it's the end of the world, life moves on...or because I got a D it's the end of the world. At the end of the day it's just exams.

AC: Hmmm. So in year 10 and 11 you were doing your GCSE courses, and did you have much help in school around that time. Not maybe just you, but everybody....

YP: Yes we all got help...like we used to have like a Saturday School we could go to...it was free. But I didn't go to it...it was just boring. Everyone would just be there and mess about, so I didn't go to it. At home...when I was here, they would ask me....like when I was doing my Drama production, like say I had to learn scripts, I would like come here, and then like I would practice it, because I can cram things in my head easy...I would practice it, and then I would stand here and act it out for them, and ask them whether it's good or not. And sometimes they would tell me, 'It's good. Now go and practice again. So I would go and practice again and come and show it to them again, and then eventually, they would be like, 'OK it's alright now', and then the next day I would go to school, perform it, and then get my grade, and be like, 'Yay! I passed!' They were quite helpful in terms of Drama and ICT. Do you know [names member of staff]? When I was doing my ICT exam she was doing IT as well...like she was doing some IT course, and me and her used to work together, because she taught me some things that I didn't know, and I taught her some things that she

didn't know. So it was helpful. And that meant that I wasn't just doing it alone....I could actually go to someone.

AC: Oh that's good! And who else was helpful here? What about your key worker.....

YP: Oh she was helpful. Like all the time she asked me, 'Do you need any equipment?' and there would be times like, when I used to go to school...when I was going to school, I was....I could work myself up yeah, but she would always make sure that I was....because she knew I was independent, and I wouldn't really come to her for anything....so she basically just always came to me, and she always asked me if I was OK. And she came to my Parents' Evenings with me and that...and that really helps because like Parents' Evening, everyone has their parents to come with them, and it was just like, 'Oh! Me.' And because she's Jamaican she came to Parents' Evening with me, and everyone was saying to me, 'Is that your mum?', and I was like, 'No, she's my aunt', because she's Jamaican and I'm African! So she....no-one cares but like some people are [unclear] because I'm like yeah she's my aunt or whatever so....Yes just the fact that she gave with me, made me feel better, because when I had to go and get my results, or when I had plays at school, the staff would come with me and watch it, and it felt good that....you know. At least I'm not going to stuff on my own....so.....they came and encouraged me a lot in terms of education.

AC: Was that all the staff or your key worker?

YP: It was particularly my key worker, and [names member of staff]. But like all the staff...they all did what they have to, to help me, which was good.

AC: So you have told me about the exams and how you felt building up to the exams, and what did you get again? I know you did really well....

YP: It wasn't that good. Drama I got 4 Bs, History I got a D, Maths I got a D! I don't know what I'm laughing for, but it sounds a bit silly! ICT I got an A. English I got an A slash D! What else did I do? Science...Science I got double Bs.

AC: Oh that's really good!

YP: I revised the night before! What else, I can't remember....I said Maths, I said English...yeah Maths, English, Science, ICT, Drama, History. So overall I only got like 2 Ds, and everything was A and Bs. I wasn't even bothered like....like I said, I wasn't going to push myself, so I just did my best and if I passed I passed, and if I failed I failed. I know I've done my best. Because like I said yeah, I'm doing it for me. It's not like I have parents who say to me....you know...because some parents are a bit pushy, like they want you to go and read your book and what not, so I never had....I do it when it suits me. I think that's important as well. Like when people are pushed to do something...you do it when it suits you. Obviously you need to get them to encourage you, but too much pushing is not really good. If you know what you are doing, and you know that you are doing it for yourself....at the end of the day you are going to benefit from it the most, not your parents or what not.

AC: Who do you think encouraged you the most?

YP: I think I encouraged myself the most actually. That sounds a bit selfish! No really and truly, I did. I did.

AC: That's brilliant. And did you know what you wanted to do when you finished your GCSEs or....

YP: No when I finished my GCSEs...I wanted to do Psychology, and I had my head into doing psychology and what not....and there was one person who kind of said to me like, 'You can't do Psychology, because [unclear]'

[Phone rings].

AC: Who said that!?

YP: I'm not going to tell you who. But someone came and said to me that I couldn't do psychology.

AC: An adult?

YP: Yes an adult. They said, 'You can't do psychology. You can't do this. You can't do that. My son...' OK not my son...this person got better grades....not....basically what they said to me was indirectly... but I don't really take anything to heart and I was just like, 'Whatever', and because the person's child is at home and I'm in care, I was like, 'Ok well you're not really helping me but whatever, isn't it'. Everything happens for a reason...and they were kind of like, 'OK my son is doing Accounting or whatever.....you can't do....' So for me that's kind of like they're putting me down, but I don't really...it doesn't really bother me anyway I just smile about it, and I'm just like, 'OK then, whatever', but yeah...that point I kind of questioned, 'Can I do this, Can I do that? [unclear]' but when I started college I couldn't actually do psychology....well I could but it was going to be too much....loads to put on myself, because I got an A and a D, I was told I had to take my English language again, and I had to take my maths again so...they said to me after I'd done my maths I could take my psychology, and I was like, 'Oh that's long!', so I said that I wasn't going to do that, and I was going to take other subjects, because you don't really need to do psychology to do psychology at university.

AC: Hmmm. So did you apply before, or did you decide when you went there?

YP: I applied for Psychology and Sociology and English and something else...and then when I went for my [unclear] interview I spoke to the person who was in charge or whatever, and then she sat me down and spoke to me and said, 'Are you sure? You can do these certain subjects and you can still do psychology', and I said, 'OK then'...but then after my first term in college I actually realised that I don't want to do psychology. I want to do something that's around....I don't want [or I do want] to work with kids, I don't [or I do?] want to work with crazy people either, but I don't want to sit round talking to people all day....so I knew I wanted to do something around that, but because psychology was all I knew, that's why I said I wanted to do psychology. And then I did some research...and I don't know...I might change my mind again, but since then I thought I'm actually really interested in Law. And I thought again, 'Well I am interested in law, but I don't really want to become....I don't



want to be reading loads of Acts and Rules and legislations', because I'm not really that much of a working type, I like to have fun most of the time. So then I thought, 'Hmmm...maybe', because as you get through...you kind of like get to know more, I thought, 'Well maybe if I can do something combined. Like do law and something else that I really enjoy as well', so I might still get a degree [unclear], so I kind of conclude that I'm still going to do law, and I'm going to do maybe philosophy, because I enjoy philosophy, not RE. RE is a bit boring now. Law, philosophy and English....I'll combine it...and yes something like that.

AC: So what are you doing now in college?

YP: Because I just completed my AS, I'm going to.....

AC: What were you doing that in?

YP: I'm doing Health and Social care, I'm doing RE, I'm doing philosophy....

AC: A levels?

YP: Yes. And I'm going to do my maths again this year coming. And I was going to do my English, but my teacher is still trying to convince me not to do it because she said to me that it's too much.

AC: What to do an A level in that?

YP: In English as well. And I am doing Health and Social care A level, philosophy, and maybe that's too much for me...not just too much for me, but you're meant to drop one the second year, not pick up. So she said to me that I should think about it for the next two weeks, and then if I really want to do it, I should so it. But she said to me, it's better for me to get really really good grades in the ones I am doing now, rather than get decent grades in all of it.

AC: So are you doing maths GCSE or A Level?

YP: No I'm going to do English GCSE....no English A level, and maths GCSE.

AC: So you're doing the maths anyway?

YP: I have to.

AC: It sounds like a lot. It's up to you isn't it!

YP: I don't mind. I'm going to take her advice, because I'm not always right. I'm sure she knows what she is talking about. So I am going to take her advice. I won't do the English A level. I'll just leave it, and just do the ones I've got and just try and excel in the ones that I've got...rather than putting more work on myself.

AC: Could you start it and see how you go, or is that not an option?

YP: I could. I could. Start it and see how it goes....

AC: You're not sure yet. You're still deciding...

YP: Yes.

AC: And then you are going to apply to universities next year?

YP: Yes I've already started applying....

AC: Yes...where have you applied to....?

YP: Cambridge, UCL, LSE. Those are the top ones. And the bottom ones are Queen Mary's and Kent.

AC: Hmmm. What made you choose those?

YP: They do my course....they do my course, and because....I think I am going to be slacking.....because the grades I am getting....I don't feel like I am working for it....so I want to like work for something. Because I know that those universities, the grades that are required are really high, so I want to actually make myself work for something. So that I can actually get it, so that I actually can feel like, 'Yes I worked for it', because the grades I get, I don't think I work for it....I think it just comes too easily to me, so I want to work for it, and think, 'Yes I actually got there, and I did it and I worked hard.' That's why.

AC: Hmmm. OK. And what about your social worker?

YP: I have had so much social workers. [Name of current social worker] has only been my social worker for 6 months, or I think a year, about a year. But I think during my....during secondary school.....

AC: Sorry...she has been your social worker for 6 months?

YP: For like a year or less than a year. I've had loads of social workers. I've had different social workers...like every 6 months. So my social workers haven't really been a help in terms of education, because they don't really stay.

AC: So they haven't been a main thing that's always there?

YP: No.

AC: Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that may be important?

YP: No.

END OF INTERVIEW.

Code	Theme No.	Theme	Sub-theme No.	Sub-theme	Number of sources
Friends - maintaining links	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	7
Foster carer - providing stability	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	4
Teaching staff - maintaining links	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	4
Foster carer - as parent	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	3
Teaching staff - as attachment or parent figure	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	3
Friends - separation	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	3
Siblings - being together and being together helps	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	3
Siblings - separation difficult	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	1	significant relationships	1
Teaching staff - emotional support	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	9
Friends - similar experiences	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	7
Friends - to talk to	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	6

Teaching Staff - Being noticed by	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	5
Social Worker - not helping	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	4
Foster carers - to talk to	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	4
Social Worker - emotional support	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	3
Parents or family - not available	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	3
Residential staff - emotional support	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	2	availability of supportive social networks	2
Hobbies, interests and playing	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	3	engagement in wider social networks	10
Friends - to play with	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	3	engagement in wider social networks	8
School – trip	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	3	engagement in wider social networks	7
School - enjoying play	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	3	engagement in wider social networks	5
Religion	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	3	engagement in wider social networks	2
Peers – discord	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	4	harmony/discord	8
Parents or family - problems with	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	4	harmony/discord	8
Teaching staff - getting on with	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	4	harmony/discord	7
Teaching staff - discord	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	4	harmony/discord	5
Getting on with everyone	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	4	harmony/discord	5
Foster carers - discord	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	4	harmony/discord	2
Sibling – discord	1	relationships and experiences impacting on emotional wellbeing.	4	harmony/discord	2

Revision- at school	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	9
Teaching staff - being a balance of fun and strict	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	8
Revision - practical resources	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	7
Options - supported choosing	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	4
Rewards in school	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	4
Careers or exam advice	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	3
Enjoying work experience	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	3
Teaching staff - surprised by results	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	2
School - going to a single sex one	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	2
Being taught for the tests	2	Academic Support/Experiences	1	mainstream school systems and procedures	1
Teaching staff - practical help	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	15
Teaching staff - encouraging	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	11
Learning support	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	11
Teaching staff - having high expectations	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	7
Teaching staff - taking time to explain	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	4
Teaching staff - needing t to push	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	4
Having a mentor	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	4
Life Skills	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	4
Revision - technique	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	4
Teaching staff - recognising potential	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	3
Connexions - practical support	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	3
Revision - with t support	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	3
Teaching staff - new ones helpful	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	2
Teaching staff - making allowances	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	2
Exams - practical support	2	Academic Support/Experiences	2	targeted school support	2

Foster carer - encouraging	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	8
Parent or family - encouraging	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	8
Foster carers - to help with work	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	7
Culture of valuing education when growing up	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	6
Practical resource for help	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	5
Social worker - encouraging	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	5
Social Worker - practical support	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	5
Social Worker - attending meetings	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	4
Social Worker - being interested in school progress	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	3
Foster carers advising	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	2
Home tutor	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	2
Residential staff - practical support	2	Academic Support/Experiences	3	external learning support.	2
Enjoying certain subjects or activities	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	14
School or learning as fun or enjoyable	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	11
Exam or test results - avg or good	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	9
Learning to read	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	7
Work – focussing	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	7
Work - not focussing or engaging	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	6
Work - content difficult	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	6
Peers - feeling embarrassed in front of	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	5
Reading – difficult	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	5
Work – easy	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	3
Feeling proud	2	Academic Support/Experiences	4	past academic experiences	2
Revision - at home	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	8
School - considered choosing	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	8
Preference for quiet or solitude	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	7

Friends - working together	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	5
Options - unsupported choosing	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	5
Working in a group	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	5
Options - Regretting or changing	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	4
Peers - as motivators or competition	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	3
Peers – disruptive	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	3
Revision - not doing it	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	3
Work - doing it at home	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	3
Coursework - completing altho not in lessons	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	2
Having time to think	2	Academic Support/Experiences	5	academic choices and preferences	1
sense of future	3	Personal Characteristics	1	values and aspirations	11
Feeling ed and gcse are important for future	3	Personal Characteristics	1	values and aspirations	10
Feeling results will not be good	3	Personal Characteristics	1	values and aspirations	7
Aiming high	3	Personal Characteristics	1	values and aspirations	5
Feeling could have done better	3	Personal Characteristics	1	values and aspirations	4
Exams – retaking	3	Personal Characteristics	1	values and aspirations	1
Independence or self reliance	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	12
Friends - having many	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	8
Growing in confidence	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	6
Being shy or quiet	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	5
Acting out	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	5
Choosing what and when to disclose	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	5
Friends - making choices about	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	5
Being distracted	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	4
Coping - Resilience	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	4

Keeping mind off problems	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
Being confident	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
Trust	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
Financial independence	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
Growing up quickly	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
typical teenager	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
Peers - choosing what to conform to	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
Older people - as friends	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	3
Being distressed	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	2
Enjoying being centre of attention	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	2
Getting a job	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	2
Parents or family - choosing not to speak to	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	2
Wanting to make a good impression	3	Personal Characteristics	2	coping strategies/behaviour	1
Options - Considered choosing	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	9
Doing your best	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	8
Exams - easy or manageable	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	6
Asking for help	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	5
Coursework - improving	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	4
Exams - hard	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	4
Choosing not to accept or have help	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	3
Parents or family - not pushing	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	2
People - negative assumptions about LAC	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	2
People - wanting to prove them wrong	3	Personal Characteristics	3	self efficacy	2
Adjusting to transition	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	13
Moving schools	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	9
Friends- moving on together	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	9



Missing school	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	5
Siblings - going to school with	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	5
School - in another country	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	4
Misplaced	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	3
Working together	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	3
School - boarding	4	change		continuity/discontinuity in school	2
Moving house	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	7
Foster care - going in and out	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	6
Parent or family- separation	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	5
Moving to live with family or friend	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	4
Parents or family - having contact	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	4
Social worker - continuity or lack of	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	4
Residential Care Unit	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	2
Feeling safe in care	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	1
Leaving everything behind	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	1
young carer	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	1
Teaching staff - unaware of family situation	4	change		continuity/discontinuity at home	1
Turning point - positive					5
Turning point - negative					3